

Food for Thought (Pre-Print)
Foodbanks in England's Small Towns in 2019
(2013 and 2016 surveys revisited)

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"To have charitable support given by people voluntarily to support their fellow citizens I think is rather uplifting and shows what a good, compassionate country we are ... Inevitably, the state can't do everything, so I think that there is good within food banks. ... The real reason for the rise in numbers is that people know that they are there and Labour deliberately didn't tell them."
The Rt.Hon. Jacob Rees-Mogg, MP (BBC News, 2017)

Introduction

This note summarizes the results of a survey of town clerks in England's small ("market") towns. The survey was designed to find out how many towns have, have had, are intending to have, or have never had, a food bank. Of the 448 clerks asked to participate, 157 did so.

Two broadly similar surveys were conducted in 2013 and 2016 (Morris, G., 2014, 2016).

The data obtained from this survey are in line with those from the previous surveys, in that they show that the number of foodbanks has continued to increase. The rate of the increase, however, has slowed.

The narrow focus of the three surveys is deliberate. It reflects the writer's interest in small towns, rural poverty, and the relationship between these towns and their hinterlands, aspects of which he researched in the 2000s (Morris, G., 2003; 2010), when few towns had foodbanks. Since then the number of foodbanks has increased to the point where most towns have one; something which would have been virtually unimaginable in the 1990s. The change is significant. The normalization of foodbanks has implications, politically, and morally. The findings of this, the two previous surveys, other research and media coverage, suggests that things have got worse.

Following a discussion about the trends identified by the surveys and the background to these, some conclusions are drawn.

Background - the 2013 and 2016 Surveys

The 2013 survey (Morris, G., 2014) was conducted as part of a wider review of the programmes contained in the UK government's rural white paper (RWP) of 2000 (DETR/MAFF, 2000). The survey was emailed to 588 towns comprising the 230 towns involved in the Market Towns Initiative² (Powe *et al.*, 2007) and a further 358 classified as market towns³ (Anon., 2019a). One hundred and ninety-nine clerks eventually completed the survey (33% response rate).

¹ This research was conducted with the approval of the Ethics Committee of the university's College of Social Sciences and International Studies. For more information, please contact the author: G.R.Morris@exeter.ac.uk

² The Market Towns Initiative was a community-led development programme designed to help people in England's small towns. The programme helped local people, first to identify the economic, environmental and social strengths and weaknesses of their towns, and then to develop projects to address local priorities (DETR/MAFF, 2000, Ch.7; Morris, G., 2012).

³ The 2013 survey email list is not the same as that used for the 2016 and 2019 surveys. The 588 towns surveyed in 2013 ranged in population from 529 to 83,641 (Morris, G., 2014, p64). The towns were selected on the assumption that their clerks would have been aware of, and interested in, the – then relatively recent – RWP 2000's programmes. The foodbank question was not central to the main purpose of the survey, but was included as an afterthought. In contrast, the primary targets of the 2016 and 2019 surveys were the smaller towns. Although two towns in these surveys have populations of approximately 40,000, the majority of the remainder fall well within the perennially hard to define "small/er/market town" population band; ie between 1500 and 25,000 (CFT, 2018; Shepherd, 2009; DETR/MAFF, 2000, p74).

The 2016 survey was emailed to 418 towns. One hundred and thirty-one responses were received, a 31% response rate (Morris, 2016, p3). Respondents were asked to name the year in which foodbank(s) opened in their town, thus enabling annual changes to be plotted.

The 2013 survey simply asked if there were foodbanks in respondents' towns in 2003 and/or 2008 (ie ten and five years prior to the survey). Consequently, exact opening dates are not known. Therefore, although the data from the 2016 and 2019 surveys can be compared directly, 2013's data cannot. Nevertheless, it has value in relation to overall foodbank numbers.

All three surveys were distributed via Online Surveys (www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/). The data obtained are illustrated in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

The trend toward more foodbanks between 2013 and 2016 is evident. It mirrors the experiences of users of the Trussell Trust's foodbanks (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017, p2), discussions in grey literature (Bulman, M, 2018), and findings from recent academic work (Lambie-Mumford, 2019).

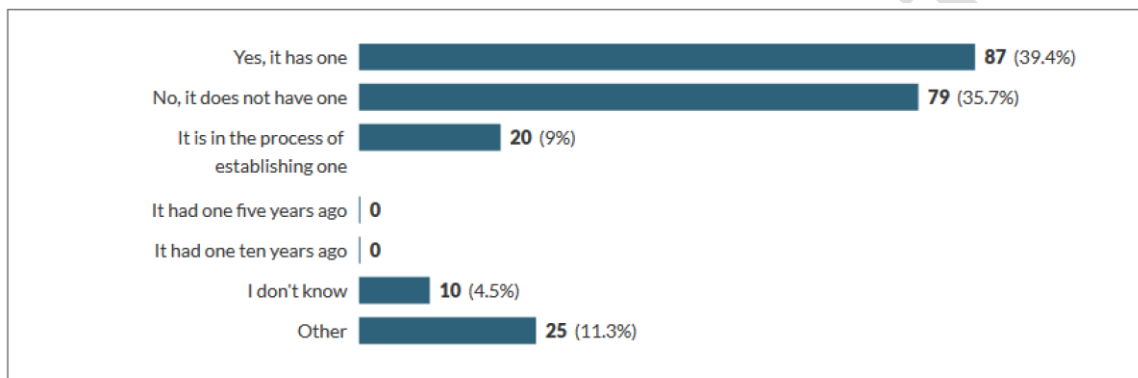


Figure 1
Data relating to food banks in England's Small Country Towns in 2013
(Morris 2014 p78)

In 2013, 79 towns did not have a foodbank (39.4% of respondents); 87 did (45.7%)⁴. By 2016, however, 74.8% of respondents – 98 towns – had a foodbank; only 29 did not have one.

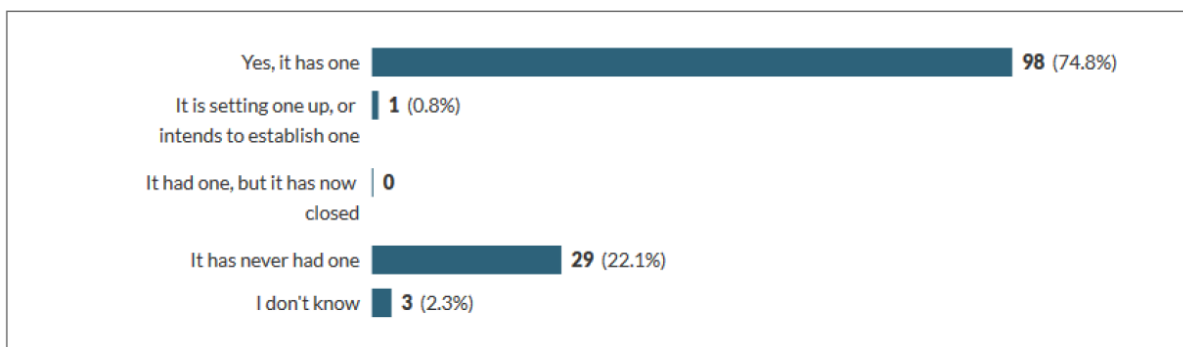


Figure 2
Data relating to food banks in England's Small Country Towns in early 2016
(Morris 2016 p4)

This trend has continued, as illustrated by the data from the 2019 survey, and as reported in the media (Bulman, M, 2019; Coughlan, 2019). It is discussed below.

⁴ The "other" option, Figure 1, is misleading. It is not a category. It is the title of a text box on the survey form in which participants could add supporting information about, for example, foodbank provision, joint working with other towns, and so forth. It should have read, "Any other comments".

The 2019 Survey

The 2019 survey was successfully sent to 412 town clerks. In all, 157 usable responses were received⁵ and analysed (ie a response rate of 38%). The results are illustrated in Figure 3.

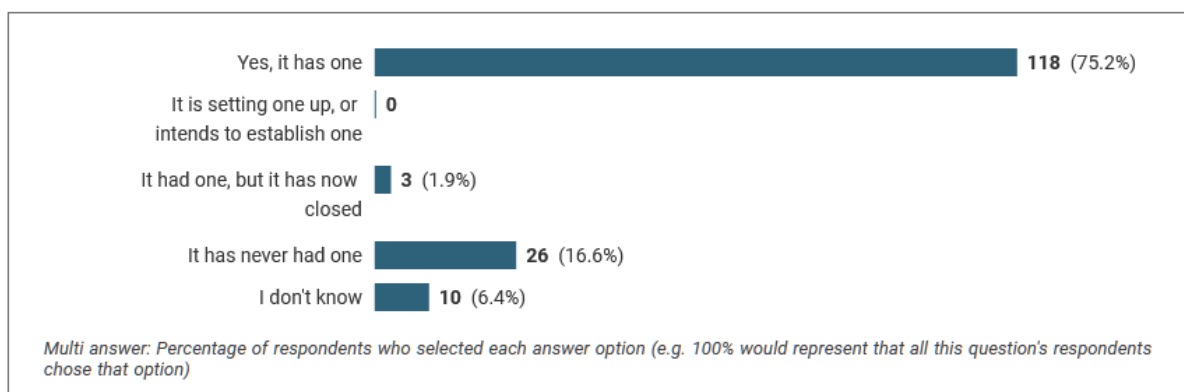


Figure 3
Data relating to food banks in England's Small Country Towns in 2019

The results are similar to those obtained from the previous surveys. There is an increase in the number of foodbanks. Participants appeared more certain in their contributions than previously. For example, fewer "I don't know" were recorded, and more additional information and commentary was provided.

The percentage of towns with a foodbank, 75.2%, is slightly higher than it was in 2016. Of the 156 participants, 118 have a food bank.

In the same period, the number of towns that have never had a foodbank decreased from 29 to 26.

Three respondents reported that their foodbank had closed.

One of the closed foodbanks was linked to the Trussell Trust. It was moved from a secular premise in the town to a chapel in a neighbouring town. The reasons given for the move include: a preference for working from church premises, a reflection of the Trust's Christian principles (Trussell Trust, 2019a); more need for help in the new location; clients' possible embarrassment due to the presence of the public in the original location; disagreement between foodbank and host organization volunteers about whether cups of tea – for volunteers and clients – should be free, or paid for; and the belief – contested by the responding clerk – that the new location had better transport links.

The second foodbank closed when the person who set it up lost the use of the building from which it operated. It is understood that the foodbank will reopen in a new building in 2020.

The reason for the third closure is the town's small size. The respondent stated that the settlement is, "... too small for discretion.", the inference being that users were embarrassed that they would be seen by friends and neighbours. Similarly, a participant from a, "... relatively wealthy and prosperous town ..." remarked on the difficulty some people find in using the foodbank, given, "... the potential stigma attached to it."⁶ This is a common concern (Williams *et al.*, 2016; p2299; Lambie-Mumford, 2019, p15), and rather contradicts the opinions expressed by some politicians that foodbanks act as a magnet for those who simply want free food (Garthwaite, 2016; Freud, 2013).

The above examples are indicative of the 2019 respondents' greater willingness to provide additional information than was the case with the previous surveys. Of the 157 respondents, 107

⁵ In most cases, the clerks to whom the emails were sent completed the survey. In some cases, however, clerks asked their colleagues, or people involved with the local foodbank(s), to complete the survey form.

⁶ Collections are now sent to a nearby larger town where, presumably, local needs can be met discretely.

(~68%) provided additional information, whereas in 2016, 59 of 131 respondents commented (~45%). In 2013, 25 (~12%) of the 199 respondents made additional comments⁷.

Much of the additional information related to foodbanks' wide areas of operation. For example, one respondent reported that, "We have a further 5 satellite foodbanks ..." serving the wider area. Others reported how their town's foodbanks served, "... 20+ parishes ...", "... the six parishes around [the town].", and, "... surrounding villages within 5 miles."

Some respondents added information about the numbers of people helped, and the type of help offered. In one example, an area-wide foodbank has, "... 26 distributors of food vouchers ... and four additional distribution points ..." covering an area of approximately 225sq.km (writer's estimate). Another respondent reported that, "We have become considerably busier ... So far this year we have given away enough food to feed 462 people for a week."; while a town that offers a service giving, "... daily assistance to the community on a range of issues ..." had also provided, "... crisis assistance ..." on 23 occasions during the first half of 2019.

In another area-wide example, school holiday lunch clubs have been set up in primary schools, because, "... many children will go hungry during this time." In another part of the country, the local foodbank, "... now distributes food parcels during the main school holidays to FSM [free school meals] families who are coping (sic) with their children not receiving term-time free meals." These examples suggest that traditional spheres of influence/hinterlands survive, with local towns performing their traditional role in relation to outlying parishes.

One clerk wrote, "I am **afraid** [writer's emphasis] that [town] does not have a foodbank ...", suggesting, perhaps (or perhaps being simply a polite response to a question), that the lack of a foodbank is now something regarded as unusual, rather than lamented; such is their ubiquity.

For example, one town, with a population of about 17,000, has, "... three or four foodbanks serving different areas of the town, all of which are well-patronised." Even respondents from towns without a foodbank noted the existence of collection points for nearby foodbanks and the local wherewithal to issue vouchers to people who need help.

Although only the 2016 and 2019 survey data can be easily combined, the results of the three surveys can be considered together, and are discussed in the next section.

The three surveys discussed

Basic data from the three surveys are summarized in Table 1.

| Survey Year | 2013 | 2016 | 2019 |
|------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| Number of towns asked to take part | 588 | 418 | 412 |
| Responses received | 197 | 130 | 157 |
| Number of unnamed towns | 0 | 7 | 5 |

Table 1
Summary Data From 2013, 2016 and 2019 Surveys

Although the 2016 survey email list was used for the 2019 survey, some of the towns that took part in 2016 did not participate in 2019, and vice-versa. The majority of clerks named their town, making for easy comparison between the two surveys.

However, seven towns were not named in 2016, and five were not named in 2019. By definition their data are included in the results (ie they took part), but, because their names were not given, they are also in the list of non-responders. Therefore, a small amount of double-counting is unavoidable when comparing data from the 2016 and 2019 surveys, in that the five 2019 unnamed towns could be amongst the seven recorded in 2016, and all will have been included in

⁷ It should be borne in mind, however, that the 2013 survey had 32 questions/comment options, and was predominantly about the Market Towns Initiative. The subsequent surveys, with seven questions/comment boxes, were much simpler to complete and, therefore, less demanding of the participants.

the online search of non-responders discussed below. These are small numbers overall, and so any effect on data quality will be negligible, but is noted.

As mentioned above, the 2013 survey results are not wholly compatible with the 2016 and 2019 data. Therefore, although the data illustrated in Figure 4 relate only to the 2016 and 2019 surveys, there were, by 2013, an additional 42 foodbanks in existence. These are the foodbanks recorded in the 2013 survey, but **not** in the 2016 and 2019 surveys (ie all duplicates have been removed). Similarly, in relation to the towns included in Figure 4, care has also been taken to ensure that information provided by the named towns that participated in both surveys is, with one exception⁸, only included once. Hence the number of responses illustrated is 229, and not, as might be assumed, 287 (ie 130 + 157, Table 1 refers).

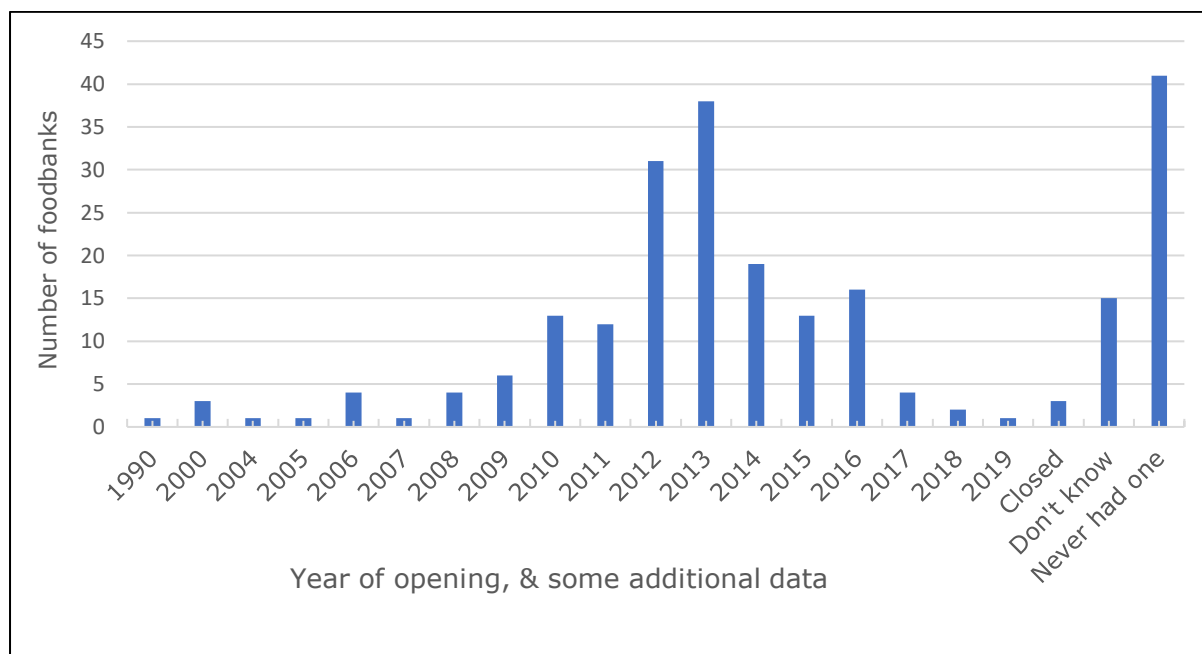


Figure 4
Number of foodbanks by reported year of opening
Data from 2016 & 2019 surveys
(229 towns – ie no duplicates)

The growth in foodbank numbers peaks between 2008 and 2013⁹. Although the number of foodbanks opening in subsequent years is lower, the total number continues to increase.

The 2019 “non-responders”

In an attempt to complete the picture in terms of the number of foodbanks, the writer conducted an online search of each of the 256 non-responding towns. The data gathered are summarised in Table 2.

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Number of towns about which information was sought | 256 |
| Number of towns about which information was found | 229 |
| Number of those towns with a foodbank | 162 |
| Number of those towns without a foodbank | 67 |

⁸ The foodbank that opened in 2019 is the second to open in the participating town. It has been included to illustrate that foodbanks are still opening. The first foodbank in the town opened in 2013, and is included in the 2013 data. The town, however, has not been counted twice.

⁹ Although the single 1990 entry is believed to be an error, the town in question does have a foodbank.

It should be noted that the search revealed that some towns have access to more than one foodbank. It was evident from the searches that towns without a foodbank are close to settlements that have a foodbank (see comments, page 4).

The results of the three surveys combined

By combining data from all three surveys and the online search, and ensuring the removal of all duplicate returns, it can be seen that 531 of the 575 towns that participated in, or were asked to take part in, at least one of the surveys, have a foodbank (Table 3).

| Survey year | 2013 | 2016 | 2019 | Online search of 2019 non-responders | Total |
|--------------------------------|------|------|------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Number of towns with foodbanks | 87 | 98 | 117 | 229 | 531 (ie 92% of the 575 towns surveyed over the years) |

While allowing for the possibility that some errors are buried within the data culled from the three surveys and online search, it is evident that the number of foodbanks in England's small towns has increased considerably since 2008. The maximum number of openings took place in 2013, since when the number of openings has fallen, with only four reported in 2017, two in 2018, and one in 2019. It is reasonable to assume that this is because most towns now have a foodbank, or have access to one. A decrease in the rate of growth as the maximum practicable number of foodbanks is approached is, therefore, to be expected.

Consequently, because most people have access to a foodbank, either in their town, or nearby, it seems there will be little point in adding to this series of surveys in, say, 2021, unless circumstances change. (It is possible, if unlikely, given today's political and economic environments, that the need for foodbanks will reduce. If it does, their locations should be tracked and mapped, as this will help identify areas in which poverty is, and is not, falling).

The rapid growth in numbers during a time of "austerity" supports the view that foodbanks are filling gaps left by benefit cuts and, in particular, complications around the introduction of Universal Credit; a view accepted by the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Amber Rudd (Fearn, 2019). It also chimes with the Trussell Trust's experience (Thompson *et al.* 2019). The Trust's finding is, however, disputed by the Department for Work and Pensions on the grounds that its, "... report uses unrepresentative data to reach an entirely unsubstantiated conclusion [and] does not prove that Universal Credit is the reason behind increased food bank usage." (Eichler, 2019).

Nevertheless, the growth in the number of foodbanks and associated usage strongly suggests systemic governmental failure, and is a logical outcome of the growth in inequality since 1979, after thirty years of post-war improvement (The Equality Trust, 2018). Forty years ago the idea that foodbanks would effectively have become the norm, and accepted as such, would have been thought postposterous.

The question is not so much, how did this happen, for we know how it happened, and why. Today, it is much more important to ask, what can be done to eradicate this blot on our country's social and economic landscape?

First, however, the background to the rapid growth in foodbank numbers, both in the UK and elsewhere, is discussed.

Discussion

Foodbank numbers have grown throughout the world. For example, the Global Food Banking Network operates in approximately 30 countries (GFBN, 2018). It is not only a UK phenomenon. Most of the countries in which GFBN operates are much poorer than the UK, and yet research by Davis and Geiger (2017) suggests that food insecurity has risen more sharply in the UK and Ireland than elsewhere (p354). They noted (p345) that although, "... *Eastern European countries had the highest overall rates of food insecurity ... the Anglo-Saxon regime had the largest post [2008] crisis rise.*" They acknowledged that their research was limited, as they were only able to investigate trends in one measure of food insecurity¹⁰ between 2003 and 2011 (p355).

They were sufficiently confident in the findings, however, to suggest that, "... *Anglo-Saxon austerity policies may partially account for the rise in food insecurity ...*" (p356). This view is supported by the Trussell Trust (2019b). It is also a view that can be supported by inference from this research - the rate of growth is evident. The connection between this and government austerity/welfare policies since 2010 is equally evident, with the latter increasing poverty and reducing life expectancy for the poor to an extent not seen since the 1930s (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019, p267).

The rapid growth in foodbank numbers in rural England – and elsewhere – suggests that poverty, although different, perhaps, in nature and scale would be recognizable both to eighteenth and nineteenth century activists (Mingay, 1990, p156), and the people who depended on soup kitchens for sustenance (COS, 1887) (Appendix).

The post-war period saw broad consensus across the political divide in relation to poverty eradication, although the debate about the extent of need, appropriate benefit levels and eligibility criteria continued. The result was less poverty and greater equality (Coats *et al.*, 2012, p.46). The rise of the "New Right", championed by Margaret Thatcher, which followed the economic shocks caused by the 1970s oil price rises and the then Labour government's public spending cuts, saw the beginning of the end of consensus (Ch.6), and – subsequently - increased poverty.

In hindsight, the immediate post-war period was anomalous. The need for foodbanks in 2019 is similar to the need for soup kitchens in the nineteenth century (TPMG, 1847) and, for more justifiable reasons, the national kitchens of the first and second world wars (Evans, 2017). That this could be so in the, "fifth biggest economy in the world"¹¹ (Davis, 2016) is surely shaming.

Today, foodbanks are effectively a normal part of community infrastructure. They are, *de facto*, part of the social support network of rural England (indeed, of the whole of the UK), their collection boxes in supermarkets simply part of the furniture¹². The Trussell Trust has, of necessity, become corporate, with a chief executive officer supported by six directors¹³. FareShare also has a corporate structure¹⁴. Similarly, IFAN, a research and action-orientated charity¹⁵ whose, "... *vision is of a country that doesn't need emergency food aid and in which good food is accessible to all.*", represents more than 200 independent food aid organisations, and again, of necessity, has staff and Trustees¹⁶.

According to the BBC, there are now approximately 2000 foodbanks in the UK (Coughlan, 2019). That the Trussell Trust, in 2005/06, had fewer than ten foodbanks illustrates both the rapid increase in foodbank numbers, and the speed at which the public have largely accepted their normalization. This, together with the corporatization of the foodbank "industry", arising from the (mainly) Coalition and Conservative governments' austerity programmes from 2010 onwards, has transformed the country's welfare system.

In their research into print media coverage of foodbanks, Wells and Caraher (2014, p.1438) noted the, "... *stark difference in our sample between the large number of newspaper articles [about*

¹⁰ "Fish/chicken/meat" was used – as these are foods that families economise on during periods of financial strain, consumption can be measured relatively easily and with confidence (p348).

¹¹ This is contested – see, for example, Reuters (2018).

¹² Although, from personal observation, they are pieces of furniture that are ignored by many.

¹³ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/about/meet-our-team/>

¹⁴ <https://fareshare.org.uk/what-we-do/our-people/>

¹⁵ <http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/>

¹⁶ <http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/>

foodbanks] in the left-leaning UK press (*The Daily/Sunday Mirror and The Guardian*) and the small number from Conservative right-wing press (*The Daily Telegraph and The Daily Mail*).” They note too, the failure to explore alternatives, such as increased benefits (p1438), and the lack of criticism of the role of foodbanks (p1439) in depoliticizing hunger (p1427).

Williams *et al.* (2016) note the, “... irony that many supermarkets donate food to the very food banks their employees are using.” (p2295)¹⁷. In a similar vein, the close relationship between government, supermarkets, the Trussell Trust and FareShare can be criticized (Garthwaite, 2019), with the Trussell Trust accepting £9,000,000 from Asda, FareShare receiving, “... millions of pounds of corporate donations.”, and the government encouraging, via a £15,000,000 grant, the expansion of charitable surplus food distribution (*ibid.*). According to Garthwaite, “Essentially, this means the state is subsidising corporations to waste food and then redistribute it in a fashion that boosts their reputation as good corporate citizens.” (*ibid.*)

These close mutually-dependent relationships between government, the food industry and dominant, professionalised foodbank providers suggests that this form of welfare is here to stay (May *et al.*, 2019). Although the Trussell Trust’s chief executive says she gets up each day trying to put the Trust out of business, she recognizes the difficulty of doing so in the current environment (Butler, 2018). Realistically, it is impossible to see how she can achieve her objective.

With the UK’s expected departure from the European Union, a move expected to increase the number of food banks (Slawson, 2019), Brexit dominates government and media. Machinery of government changes and Brexit-related pressures on ministers and civil servants have adversely affected policy development, and are likely to continue doing so (Lloyd, 2019, p.14); not least in food-related sectors (Lang *et al.*, 2018). With a minority government under pressure, not only from European Union countries, but would-be new trading partners such as the United States and China, the economy, and the Supreme Court, there will be neither the interest nor time to address the causes of poverty that have led so many people to seek help from foodbanks.

Although it is normal when discussing and critiquing research findings to present evidence from both sides of an argument and/or debate, this approach is impossible where foodbanks are concerned. There is, as far as I can find, no objective evidence-based research that supports foodbanks as a “good thing”.

Of course, there is Jacob Rees-Mogg’s quote, and there are others by those who hold similar views (Anon., 2019b), including Edwina Currie (2014), who remarked that “... kindly food bank operators rarely have the resources to visit recipients at home [and so] [o]ne imagines they would get as incensed as I do at the well-fed dogs, the obligatory wide-screen TVs, the satellite dishes, the manicures and mobiles – and the car parked outside. Desperate? No, not all of them.” Having made this charmless and unhelpful comment, Ms Currie noted that services for people with addictions are poor and that – citing Canada’s experience - foodbanks have not solved the underlying problems. She does not explore the reasons for the rapid growth in numbers, or acknowledge that government policies have an effect, other than to remark that, “Benefit levels can be substantial ... so it’s a rational choice to stay on benefits, and to get free food.” (*ibid.*). That benefit levels might be substantial is contested both by those who contributed to Philip Alston’s report to the United Nations’ General Assembly on poverty in the UK, and by Professor Alston himself (Alston, 2019).

The notion of the underserving poor underlying Ms Currie’s comments could hardly be more explicit. The Trussell Trust estimates that more than 550,000 people used a foodbank in 2017 (FF, 2017). As the Trussell Trust runs many, but not all, of the country’s foodbanks, the total number of users is likely to be more. Loopstra *et al.* (2019) point out that food bank accessibility and opening hours affect usage. Therefore the Trust’s data, often used as a proxy for total usage, might not reflect the true extent of need, food insecurity, and hunger (p8).

In their conclusion, Loopstra *et al.*, state, “In light of these findings and other studies highlighting the limitations of food banks across other dimensions, including limited food quantity and quality

¹⁷ However, it is only fair to point out that although wages for shop floor staff are relatively low (Munbodh & Davis, 2019), recent pay rises mean that workers are now paid close to, or above, the Living Wage of £9.00 per hour (Quinn, 2019).

and the socially inappropriate nature of receiving food charity, there is an urgent need for better responses to food insecurity in the UK. **Evidence suggests public policy responses to address household food insecurity will likely be most effective.**" (p8) (writer's emphasis).

Coincidentally, in the 2016 survey report's conclusion the writer quoted a previous recommendation by Rachel Loopstra and her colleagues that, "*Rather than accept this situation, an alternative is to call for action on the root social and economic factors that trigger reliance on food banks.*" (Loopstra et al., 2015, p.3). This remains an obvious and sensible recommendation. That foodbank numbers and usage, in country towns and elsewhere in the UK, continue to grow represents an equally obvious and socially unjust policy failure. This must, surely, have played its part in contributing to the current pre-Brexit chaos (Various, 2018).

Any post-Brexit crisis will make matters worse. Michael Gove, the politician responsible for preparing the country for Brexit, admitted that, should a deal on leaving the European Union not be agreed, "*Some prices may go up. Other prices will come down.*" (Buchan, 2019). The British Retail Consortium, in response, said that it was, "*categorically untrue*" that fresh food supplies would be unaffected (ibid.). Similarly, the aggregated views of a panel of nine named experts, and a number of anonymous industry specialists, suggests that, "*Food price rises after Brexit are likely to be significant and may be substantial.*" (Barons & Aspinall, 2019, p8).

Admittedly, the views and findings above are conjecture. Brexit hasn't happened. However, the omens appear to be bad, especially for the poor. Foodbank use has increased considerably since the 2013 survey. Despite all the research and the evidence visible to anyone prepared to see it, there has been little or no government action or policy development (let alone implementation). The existence of foodbanks is a scandal in plain sight, but, there are none so blind as those that will not see.

Conclusion

The results of this survey and its two predecessors confirmed what is common knowledge: foodbank numbers in England's towns, as elsewhere in the UK, have grown rapidly. The consensus amongst academics, volunteer helpers working in foodbanks, and foodbank users, is that they are needed, but should not be.

These views are shared by some, but not all, politicians. Recent Conservative-led governments appear to regard them as a good thing, a sign of David Cameron's volunteer-led Big Society in action. The Labour party's manifesto commits to scrapping policies that they believe lead to foodbank use, but does not specifically commit to closing them (Labour Party, 2017, p56). The Liberal Democrats only commit to ensuring that foodbank users know their rights and are able to apply for hardship payments (Liberal Democrats, 2017, p60), while the Green Party's 2017 manifesto makes no mention of foodbanks. On the basis of this, and given that average living standards have yet to recover from the 2008 recession (Stirling, 2019, Fig4), foodbank numbers are likely to remain high.

This provokes the question that is central to the foodbank debate, what can be done to eradicate this blot on our country's social and economic landscape? In the current political and economic climates this question is unlikely to be answered. However, if viewed from outside these environments, there are obvious answers: pay people more¹⁸, ensure that jobs are secure, build social housing for letting at genuinely affordable rents, tax people appropriately, and ensure that benefits are more reflective of social security than welfare.

¹⁸ According to Tily (2018) the UK is experiencing the longest pay squeeze since the Napoleonic wars.

Many will regard such suggestions as hopelessly naïve, if not beyond the pale¹⁹. My response to that is, well, what do you suggest? If things continue as they are, if there are no clear, coordinated policy responses, the outcome will be more divisiveness, and a less pleasant, more unfair, unequal country. Why would anybody want that?

The – depressing - conclusion, based on this and other research, is that there is no real desire from within government to develop and implement policies to reduce the need for foodbanks. It is a scandal.

At a time when, on many fronts, radical thought is needed, perhaps the last word should be left to William Cobbett, the nineteenth century journalist, ruralist, and reforming politician, who, "... *believed that the poor were ... those who did as much as anyone to create the wealth of a country ... [and] ... [w]hat he wanted for the poor was the fundamentals of a decent life: a good home, clothing and nourishing food.*" (Burton, 1997, p.254).

Surely as true today as then, and, in terms of the common good, surely not too much to ask?

¹⁹ I suggested as much to a recent inquiry by the House of Lords' Rural Economy Committee (HoL, 2019a, p.849). There were, unsurprisingly, no references in the report to suggestions I made along the lines above – clearly a step too far. However, food poverty was mentioned four times, and there were two references, more generally, to rural poverty. Disadvantage, deprivation and low pay/wages were also discussed (HoL, 2019b). That said, the recommendations made were largely familiar to anyone who had worked on and/or with the rural white papers of yesteryear (DETR/MAFF, 2000; DoE/MAFF, 1995). This is not to suggest that there is no wish or willingness to think about and develop policies; it is more a recognition of the reality that this government, and its predecessor, have neither the time nor, I fear, the interest in revisiting "the rural". It is not a priority.

APPENDIX

The Deserving and Undeserving Poor, a never ending debate

In 1871, the magnificently – and menacingly - named Council of the Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicity (COSOCR&RM, 1871) noted that no trace could be found of metropolitan soup kitchens prior to 1846, when potato blight caused, "... *distress ...*" (p1). The reasons for this²⁰ might have seemed obvious, for example, rapid population growth, industrialization and urbanization (Saville, 1957, Ch.1.), and the poverty and poor housing conditions that helped produce the concentrations of soup kitchens in urban areas (Vallance, 2010, p368).

Despite this, the researchers suggested to a soup kitchen operator ("*... a benevolent person ...*") that, "... *too much laxity in the distribution [of free food] might pauperise the recipients ...*" (p2), noting, "... *these classes of charity have an especial tendency to indefinite increase ... [being] ... connected with many pleasurable and health-giving associations ... the appearance, rather, of hospitality to the poor, than of ordinary alms-giving.*" (pp1-2).

(Incidentally, the benevolent person replied, possibly acerbically, "*I could never see that a basin of good soup could do harm to anybody.*")

The report estimated that 127,000 metropolitan (London) paupers were fed each day, with the total number of individuals fed annually being much greater. According to the report's authors, the total, "... *has to be divided between those who habitually depend upon charity, and those who are learning to do so, by finding out how much pleasanter it is to live at the expense of others than by their own labour.*" (p2).

These extracts provide a neat summary of debates about the deserving and undeserving poor that continue today, albeit now conducted in the language of benefits (ie means testing versus universal entitlement). The Trussell Trust, for example, for all its good work, knowingly or not, for practical or other reasons, reflects this dichotomy, in that it limits the provision of food to those who have been given vouchers authorizing them to make a limited number of claims. Another example of this tension was provided by the respondent (page 3) who mentioned the disagreement about the provision of free/paid for tea.

Underlying the work of the Trust and other providers is the simple fact that foodbank users, just like their nineteenth century predecessors, do not have a enough money. Indeed, as the Trust reports, "*The top three reasons for referral to a food bank ... 'income not covering essential costs', 'benefit delays' and 'benefit changes'.*" (Trussell Trust, 2019b). As ever, the root cause of poverty, and the consequential growth in the number of foodbanks, is insufficient money to enable people to provide adequately for themselves and their families.

In 1887, an article in The Times stated, "*There will always be a starving class until there is a general resolve not to run the risk of starvation by bringing children into the world without probable means of support.*" (In: COS, 1887, p21). This quotation can be found in a minority report by a Mrs Pennington in COS's report into soup kitchens, in which she counters the argument made by colleagues that the provision of free meals for children effectively lets the parents off the hook: "*I venture to think the reply to this [argument] is to be obtained by taking a long sight, not a short sight ... it is the future parent in this child ... that I would consider.*" (p21).

The majority report's conclusions, to which Mrs Pennington objected, were that free meals should not be provided, but should be paid for, and that, "... *further and more widespread education with regard to ... the principles and methods of cooking, is much needed, and that knowledge of these matters would go far to diminish the suffering ... occasioned by insufficient food.*" (p20). This argument is familiar today. Relatively recently the Conservative peer, Baroness Jenkins, made a similar point – before quickly apologizing for making it - about poor people's inability to cook (BBC, 2014). Implicit in this is the sense that people's circumstances are governed by their personal

²⁰ One would have thought the reference to the potato blight (famine) in Ireland was clue enough. It was no coincidence that the Corn Law was repealed in 1846. The horrific Irish and Scottish potato famines also contributed, by migration, to England's population growth in the 1840s.

failings, rather than the political or economic environment, disability, unemployment, low wages, insecure work (Glaze and Richardson, 2017), or their immigrant "otherness" (Rzepnikowska, 2019).

This fear of the "other" has echoed down the centuries (Winder, 2013). Often, the – sometimes understandable – reason for these fears is fear itself: fear of losing out to people prepared to work for less money, thereby increasing personal/family insecurity. Historically this has always been the case; it is easy to blame immigrants for present conditions. And indeed, for some, especially for the least qualified, there is truth in that wages might be adversely affected, although – and this is of no comfort to those affected – the overall impact appears likely to be small (Ruhs & Vargas-Silva, 2018).

People emigrate for many reasons, but conditions at home seem to be the biggest driver (Czaika & Haas, 2017). As a rich country the UK is – or has been – an attractive destination, but the 2008 financial crash, caused by some banks' recklessness (Amadeo, 2019), coupled with deindustrialization and the changes in employment practices associated with globalization, such as zero hours contracts and increased agency working (Hanley, 2011, p5)²¹, has seen the UK maintain its position as one of the most unequal countries in Europe, in which, "... *the top 10% of households own almost half [the nation's wealth] while the poorest fifth's overall wealth has declined in real terms.*" (Partington, 2019). According to the Office of National Statistics the average income of the poorest one-fifth of the population – when ranked by equivalised household disposable income – contracted by 1.6%.

It would be naïve to think that the increase in foodbank numbers and usage has nothing to do with these changes, and that the precarious economic positions that many people, indigenous and immigrant, find themselves in are solely due to their failings. And yet, by some at people at least, the poor still tend to be categorized as deserving or underserving, with surveys showing that Conservatives are, "... *over three times more likely than Labour supporters ... to agree that most people living in poverty in the UK today are doing so because of their own bad choices and decisions.*", such as, "... *a lack of work ethos and people not being willing to accept boring/menial jobs ...*" (Shorthouse and Kirkby, 2014, pp34-35).

The New Labour governments between 1997 and 2010 adopted a different tone and policy approach to that of previous Conservative governments. They attempted to tackle persistent poverty, initially via research into aspects of poverty such as social exclusion, deprivation and disadvantage (Morris, 2010, Ch.2). Arguably, this led to a better understanding of poverty, but made for little improvement in addressing the fundamentals (p54) associated with, for example, low wages and poor job opportunities. In effect, Labour compensated for factors such as these by providing additional financial support via, for example, child benefit and tax credits (Coats *et al.*, 2012, Ch.7), and the minimum wage. This, however, was at the expense of social insurance; recognition, perhaps, that the universality versus the deserving/undeserving poor debate had effectively been won by the latter²².

Whether this is due to public misperceptions about how much of the country's welfare budget is spent on the unemployed is open to question. According to the Office of National Statistics, in the financial year, 2016, the government spent £264bn on welfare. Of this total, 1% was spent on unemployment benefits, and 42% was spent on pensions (ONS, 2016); figures that might surprise some.

The existence of foodbanks is evidence enough that poverty exists in England's small towns, and beyond. Debates about whether they are good or bad, about the underlying reasons for their

²¹ Helpman (2017), states, "*that trade [plays] an appreciable role in increasing wage inequality, but ... its cumulative effect has been modest, and ... globalisation does not explain the preponderance of the rise in wage inequality within countries.*" This suggests that "in-country" inequality is in part due to decisions taken by national governments. As Partington (2019) notes, although inequality in the UK has fallen slightly in recent years, it is still higher (as measured by the Gini coefficient) than it was in the 1960s.

²² Although this trend closely matches the period since the first Thatcher government in 1979, Gough (1980, p7), noted that the, "*quantitative attack on the welfare state was initiated by the Wilson/Callaghan administrations in 1975 ...*". The 1997 New Labour government initially followed the previous Conservative government's approach by, for example, cutting one-parent benefits, before changing tack towards policies designed to move people from welfare into work and to reduce child poverty (Brewer *et al.*, 2002).

existence, and the welfare state's ability to distinguish between deserving and undeserving poor are essentially unchanging, and are, it seems, destined to be never-ending. For example, the political blogger, Guido Fawkes²³, stated, "*Guido doesn't believe in socialism or the perfectibility of man, so sees the expansion of foodbanks as a good thing for the poor.*" (Guido Fawkes, 2014). His view is not shared by the Archbishop of Canterbury (ACNS, 2018), or, as discussed above, by the Trussell Trust.

Suffice it to say, in the words of a proverb, *The full man doesn't understand the wants of the hungry.*

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²³ Started and run by the libertarian writer, Paul Staines (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Staines).

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