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THE TASTE OF AUSTERITY: EXPLORING THE EVERYDAY OF
FOOD AID IN EAST BRISTOL

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SUMMARY

This thesis examines the everyday of food aid and food insecurity in East Bristol by exploring three different community-based models of food aid – the food bank, the community kitchen, and the community food centre. Since austerity, food insecurity has increased exponentially, and community-based sites of food aid have emerged to provide much needed support for people experiencing hardship. However, where academic and political attention has been focused on the food bank, other emergent forms of food aid have been underexplored. Addressing this gap in knowledge, this thesis takes a place-based approach to the study of food aid, and explores the wider landscape of food aid, revealing how they work, why people use them, what happens in these spaces, and how they are used, in order to better understand the value, significance and experience of food aid for people experiencing food insecurity. Informed by a multi-sited ethnography built on 11 months of fieldwork, this thesis is produced using data collected through participant observation, semi structured interviews (35), a focus group, and photo documentation. Centering the voices of those accessing and providing food aid, this thesis engages with themes of precarity and power, to highlight these spaces as sites of multiplicity with the potential for care, discipline, control and sociality.

DECLARATIONS AND STATEMENTS

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed: Lucy Jackman (candidate)

Date: 30/06/2021

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed: Lucy Jackman (candidate)

Date: 30/06/2021

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CFC	Community Food Centre
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DHP	Discretionary Housing Payment
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
IFAN	Independent Food Aid Network
JSA	Jobseeker's Allowance
LA	Local Authority
PIP	Personal Independence Payment
TTT	The Trussell Trust
UC	Universal Credit
VCSE	Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise sector

INTRODUCTION

I met Sue on her first visit to the food bank. She arrived just as it opened and, handing her red food bank voucher to a volunteer, sat at the closest table, with her back to the door and her arms folded tightly across her chest. Introducing myself (as a volunteer), I sat down next to her, and upon learning that this was her first visit to the food bank, talked her through the process. She was clearly uncomfortable about being there, giving one-word responses to any questions I asked her. But after engaging in small talk and discussing my research project (the information sheet was on the table in front of her) she started to appear more relaxed and told me that she'd been feeling embarrassed about coming to the food bank – "*it's a matter of pride*", she told me. Having recently undergone a reassessment for PIP (Personal Independence Payment), her benefits had been significantly reduced a couple of months before. She was unable to work due to her illness and her husband, who was self-employed, had been struggling financially for a while, which meant that they had become heavily dependent on her PIP payments to go towards basic essentials. Now, since her payment reduction, they were finding it harder to make ends meet, pay their bills and buy enough food for themselves and their three children.

Offering her a cup of tea, which she declined, I asked if her husband would be joining her in the food bank. To which she smiled and raised her eyebrows, "*he's in the car. He let me do it – you know what men are like with their pride*". Once her food parcel was ready, I helped her out with her (many) bags and, as we walked towards the car, I noticed that the engine was already running. It made me wonder whether this was because of her husband's discomfort at going to the food bank and was a way of ensuring that he was ready to leave at any moment.

After her third visit to the food bank, I ended up interviewing Sue at her home. Offering me a coffee, we sat in her living room and talked about her recent experiences. Telling me how devastated she was by the recent PIP evaluation; she explains that it wasn't a fair assessment of her circumstances because she has a long-term health issue that significantly impacts on her day-to-day life. Because of the reduction, she'd had to use the food bank once a month for the past three months,

though she tells me, "*there have been times when I've needed to go, or I felt like I needed to go more*". Reiterating her embarrassment at having used the food bank she tells me that asking for help isn't something she's comfortable doing.

> *Sue: I hate to say it, but I'm one of those people who won't tell someone I'm struggling. Coz [sic] it actually took her [the support worker who referred her] to notice herself.*
>
> *Me: Really? Did that take a while?*
>
> *Sue: Didn't take her that long! [Laughs] Probably took her a couple of times coming out and then she was like, 'nah this can't go on'.*

Recounting her first experience of using the food bank, Sue reflected on the emotional toll of having to go to food aid providers in order to obtain essential items.

> *"The first time I went, I didn't want to walk in through the door, I must admit [laughs]. It's hard…it's really hard and it's…I don't dread it, that's not the right word I'm looking for - I don't know. It makes…uh…I can't quite think really, it just makes you feel that, not worthless as such…no it does, it makes you feel like - like shit. You know, that you've actually got to go and get something that you should really be providing yourself."*

Interviewing her in the middle of winter, she tells me about the hard decisions she and her husband have had to make between heating the house – so that they and their children are warm – and paying for food. To make their resources go further, Sue mainly bulk buys low-cost frozen food from budget supermarkets, but on a day-to-day basis, she and her husband skip lunch, and sometimes other meals, in order to make sure their children have enough to eat. Something that has an impact on her health in multiple ways:

> *"If you've got tablets from the doctors that you need to take with food but are skipping meals to make food last longer - you're not taking your medicine!"*

This also affects her children, not just in terms of the quantity of food that is available at home, but also in the quality of the food that they consume. Sue tells me that though her youngest enjoys his fruit and veg, it's too expensive to buy a lot for him to eat at home, and she's had to ask him to eat something more substantial than salad for his Free School Meal so that he doesn't come home hungry:

> *"He'll go and have the salad bar even when it's snowing and raining and cold! But I have spoken to the school and said you know, please, give him a proper meal!"*

Which, for Sue, is a meal that is hot and filling. Joining us towards the end of the interview, Sue's husband contextualises their experiences as part of a wider problem. He explains that while the welfare system isn't fit for purpose, the cost of living is also increasing, which adds further pressure – *"how do they [the government] expect people to get by with nothing?"*. Sue adds that over the past few years, *"…food's gone up, electricity's gone up, gas has gone up, petrol's gone up. Everything"*. Reflecting on living in Bristol, she tells me that *"it's a nice place to live, but it's expensive. Very expensive"*. To which her husband comments that inequality is growing as a consequence, *"the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer – that's what I say to you all the time, isn't it?"*. Agreeing with his statement, Sue looks to me and says:

> *"People like you [the food bank] shouldn't be responsible – the government should be"*.

1.1 FOOD INSECURITY, AUSTERITY AND FOOD AID

This thesis examines the everyday lived experience of food aid and food insecurity in East and Central-East areas of Bristol, the largest city in the South West of England. It takes a place-based approach to the study of food aid and food insecurity, contributing to geographical understanding by exploring encounters within and between sites of food aid, and dwelling on everyday lived experience in order to better understand the value and significance of food aid for those experiencing food insecurity.

Like many of the people I interviewed for this thesis, Sue and her family experienced household food insecurity, which is defined as "being unable to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food for health, in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so" (Dowler et al., 2001, p. 2). More recent discourse around food insecurity has also sought to emphasise the significance of including social *and* cultural acceptability, to promote the importance of access to food appropriate for people's cultural backgrounds (Ali, 2021; Garoës-Hill, 2021; SLCgreen, 2021). In Sue's case, food insecurity was directly experienced because of a lack of income from employment and welfare benefits; but for others more generally in the United Kingdom (UK), lack of income can also intersect with access to and availability of food, producing food insecurity[1]. Because food insecurity is primarily driven by financial hardship, it is a phenomenon that is embedded in wider experiences of poverty and inequality and can be experienced to varying degrees (see Figure 1). Often referred to as 'food poverty', the two terms are used interchangeably, though are applied in different contexts. For example, food insecurity is the term used by government, and is the preferred term when discussing measurement and scale of the problem; whereas 'food poverty' is widely used when talking about the experiences of individuals, for it captures "the longer and bigger impact of living in poverty" (Caraher & Furey, 2018, p. 7). In this thesis, I choose to use food *insecurity* to describe the experiences of individuals. I find that the term better reflects the state and feeling of precarity that so many of my participants experienced, including Sue – where the smallest change in circumstances has the capacity to knock someone into food insecurity. A state and feeling that drives this thesis. However, in my use of the term, I do not deny the prevalence of poverty within the participant group.

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[1] Issues of access and availability have been particularly well documented during the Covid-19 pandemic, where people have had limited access to shops and support networks, and limited availability of food in the supermarkets during the early stages of the pandemic.
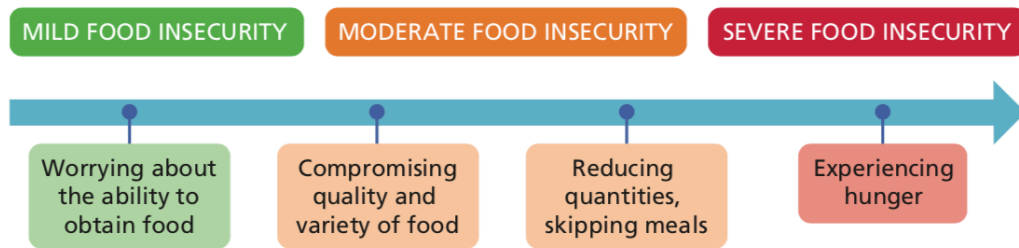
Figure 1: Food insecurity scale. (May et al., 2018, p.30)

In the UK, food insecurity has been a growing phenomenon since at least the 1980s (Riches, 1997a; Strong, 2021), but has escalated at an alarming rate since the 2007-2008 global financial crisis (GFC), and in particular, following the introduction of 'austerity' measures in 2010 by the Conservative Liberal Democrat Coalition Government. Under austerity, the Coalition government introduced a series of policies that reduced public spending, with the aim of reducing the government's budget deficit. This involved cuts to public services and welfare reform, which are policies that have disproportionately targeted and affected low-income households and communities (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Importantly, while the policies themselves have negatively impacted low-income households, austerity has also compounded and prolonged socio-economic pressures already placed on households like Sue's. Pressures such as rising unemployment from the fallout of the financial crisis; the wider prevalence of insecure work, seen in zero-hour contracts and 'gig-economy' roles (Lambie-Mumford, 2017; Standing, 2011); low-paid work, understood to be anything below the 'Real Living Wage' (at the time I conducted this research, this was set at £8.75 p/h in Bristol); and the rising cost of living – most notably the cost of food, utility bills, housing, and transport. Factors that, in correspondence with the impact of welfare reform and cuts to public services, have created the perfect conditions for financial hardship, leading to the growth of food insecurity, precarity, poverty and inequality in the UK.

As Hall (2019) has stated, austerity was not a 'necessary' response to the global financial crisis, but a 'political choice' rooted in neoliberal logic. A logic which is said to play on notions – or rather, 'deceptions' (Cooper & Whyte, 2017) – of 'responsibility', 'togetherness', and 'fairness' to frame and legitimise austerity measures (Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Hall, 2019). The reality of this political

decision-making has meant that for many in the UK, the way in which austerity is lived and felt (Hall, 2019) is through the experience of food insecurity and having to access food aid to get by. What I call in this thesis the 'taste of austerity'.

In response to the growing crisis of food insecurity, we have seen a significant increase in community-based responses to hunger, referred to here as 'food aid' providers, which is an umbrella term used to describe:

> *"a range of large-scale and small local activities aiming to help people meet food needs, often on a short-term basis during crisis or immediate difficulty; more broadly they contribute to relieving symptoms of household or individual-level food insecurity and poverty." (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014, p. iv)*

'Food aid' is a broad category and is considered to cover 'emergency' provision, such as food banks and soup kitchens; 'non-emergency' provision, such as community fridges, Pay as You Feel (PAYF) cafés, and other subsidised food provision – like the recent growth of the food 'pantry' model[2]; as well as state funded support – such as Free School Meals (FSM) and Healthy Start Vouchers. Importantly, in order to be able to provide free or subsidised food support, many, if not most of the community-based food aid providers distribute donated goods, or use 'food surplus' – using food redistribution charities like 'FareShare' to access food surplus from supermarkets, wholesalers and farms, and repurposing it from becoming 'food waste'. Which in itself has raised questions about the quality and ethics of the food provided– of distributing 'surplus' food otherwise destined for landfill, animal consumption or anaerobic digestion – and the dignity of receiving donated goods, of another's choosing, when experiencing hardship.

Together, these food aid initiatives and charities – particularly community-based providers, who are the focus of this research – can be seen to create a 'food aid sector' in the UK. 'Food banks', like the one described in the opening extract, are the

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[2] Food pantries are designed to save people money on shopping. For example, a popular model in the South West – 'FOOD Clubs' – provide members with approximately £15 worth of food for £3.50. At the time I conducted this research, there were no such 'subsidised' food aid provision models operating in Bristol.

most identifiable model of food aid and are initiatives that provide free food parcels for people to take away, prepare and eat when experiencing food insecurity (Lambie-Mumford, 2014, p.1418). Over the past 50 years, food banks have become an international phenomenon – particularly in North America and other high-income countries[3] – and have come to be recognised as "symptoms and symbols of welfare states in decline if not in crisis (Riches & Silvasti, 2014, p.1). This association certainly resonates in the UK, where academics widely claim that the 'rise of the food bank' over the past 10 or so years of austerity directly speaks to inadequacies in our welfare state, meaning that food banks have become "iconic of social injustice and welfare failure" (Cloke et al., 2017, p. 703). As a result of their recent emergence and rapid growth in the UK, food banks have become embedded in our patchworked landscape of frontline care and support, and in particular have been "incorporated as vital frontline responses to poverty" (Power & Small, 2021, p. 2) during the pandemic where staff and volunteers were classified as 'key workers'. Understandably, food banks have become the object of much attention in academia, with notable research into the drivers of food bank use and user profiles (Loopstra & Lalor, 2017; MacLeod et al., 2019; Prayogo et al., 2017); the everyday of how they operate (Garthwaite, 2016a); how they can be seen as complex sites of care (Cloke et al., 2016), and how they function in relation to the welfare state (Lambie-Mumford, 2017; May et al., 2019, May et al., 2020; Power et al., 2017). But despite this rich literature base, there is still much to understand about these spaces and their relevance and roles within our neighbourhoods, and most importantly, for those who use them.

Significantly, how food banks work within the wider landscape of food aid is still under-explored, and important to understand, because in the UK food banks are thought to make up only 50% of all food aid provision (Forsey, 2014). Indeed, where food banks have been at the forefront of public consciousness and academic debate around food insecurity and austerity, it is easy to assume that they are the only option for people in such circumstances. This is not the case, yet little is known about other

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[3] The term 'food bank' in the UK refers to a model that provides food directly to people in need, whereas in other high-income countries, a food bank is more commonly used to describe an organisation that provides smaller charities and organisations with food to distribute onwards. A model of operation that more closely resembles the food redistribution charity 'FareShare' in the UK.

forms of food aid that have emerged or intensified under austerity (notable exceptions include Kate Haddow's study of 'hidden' sites of food aid in Middlesbrough), and in particular, less is known about how people are using these providers in relation to the food bank, and in relation to other forms of support. This is a gap in knowledge that I address in this thesis by examining three different models of food aid within East and Central-East Bristol, and by exploring the ways in which people use and experience them. In doing so, I pursue the lived and felt reality of these sites and experiences (Hall, 2019) and centre the voices of those who access, and those who provide food aid, at the heart of this thesis.

1.2 THE SCALE OF FOOD INSECURITY IN THE UK

To better understand food aid sites, food insecurity, and the connection with austerity policies it is important to examine the scale of food insecurity in the UK. According to recent figures published by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) from the 'Family Resources Survey' (2021), approximately 14% of households in the UK (equivalent to 9.5 million people) experienced some form of food insecurity during 2019-2020[4] (categorised as 6% marginal, 4% low, and 4% very low food security). Unfortunately, because the UK government only started to measure household food insecurity in 2019, we are unable to compare corresponding datasets over time and against austerity policies for the period leading up to 2019. However, we can draw on food bank data to act as a proxy measure for this time period.

Today, in 2021, approximately 58% of all food banks in the UK are run by the charity, 'the Trussell Trust' (Independent Food Aid Network, 2021), and every Trussell Trust Foodbank[5] collects information about their clients, including the number of emergency food parcels distributed, client demographics, and importantly, the primary drivers of food bank use. This data is then aggregated and used to give a national picture of food bank use across the 'Trussell Trust Foodbank Network'. It is

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[4] Survey respondents were only asked to report on their experiences in the 30 days prior to the survey. Which means that it is likely rates of food insecurity experienced over a 12-month period would be significantly higher (Cooper, 2021).
[5] 'Foodbank' is the registered brand of a Trussell Trust Foodbank, though is not used to describe the outlets (e.g., 'East Bristol Foodbank' has four 'food bank' outlets where they distribute food from).

a valuable resource for observing the changing landscape of food insecurity under austerity.

As I mentioned earlier, food bank provision has rapidly expanded under austerity. To exemplify this, in 2009-10, the Trussell Trust were operating food banks in 29 different local authorities (Loopstra et al., 2015, p. 1), and today, are operating in 299 out of 343 local authorities across the UK (The Trussell Trust, 2021). In the same year, 2009-10, the Trussell Trust distributed 40,898 emergency food parcels to people experiencing food insecurity. Less than a decade later, in 2017-18 when I started this fieldwork, the number of food parcels distributed had increased to 1,354,388 – a 33-fold increase. This pattern continued, and in 2020-21, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Trussell Trust food banks distributed 2,537,198 emergency food parcels – a 62-fold increase from 2009-10 and almost double the number distributed during my year in the field.

Food parcels distributed by the Trussell Trust significantly increased between 2011 and 2013, corresponding to the introduction of key austerity measures. Most notably, the introduction of higher conditionality requirements (which refer to behavioural requirements placed on welfare claimants); the 'freeze' on child benefit rates; the introduction of the spare room subsidy (bedroom tax); the replacement of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) with PIP, which introduced stricter eligibility criteria and more frequent assessments (often conducted by people who were not trained health professionals – something that Sue, in the introduction, fell victim to); and the benefit 'cap'. Many of these changes fell under the 2012 'Welfare Reform Act', which also outlined the introduction of 'Universal Credit' – a single means-tested benefit that would replace Housing Benefit, income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, and Income Support – which, when rolled-out, correlated with a 52% increase in food bank use (The Trussell Trust, 2018a). After 2013, and following the roll-out of Universal Credit, food bank use increased at a steady (but significant) rate, continuing to increase with the introduction of the benefit freeze in 2016; and the implementation of the 'two-child limit' on child tax credit, which was introduced in 2017.

Confirming the correlation between food bank use and austerity policies, a 2015 study found that Trussell Trust food banks are more likely to have opened and been heavily used in areas with higher unemployment, deeper spending cuts on local authority services and welfare benefits, and higher rates of JSA sanctioning[6] (Loopstra et al., 2015). Findings that correspond to the Trussell Trust's 'primary reasons' for food bank use (see Figure 2), which during 2017-18, were 'low income' (28.5%), 'benefit delays' (23.7%), and 'benefit changes' (17.7%). In addition, the Trussell Trust found that of those who reported low income (and were referred electronically rather than given a red food bank voucher like Sue), the biggest single and fastest growing reason for accessing the food bank was 'low income – benefits, not earning' (Trussell Trust, 2018b), indicating inadequacies in benefit rates.
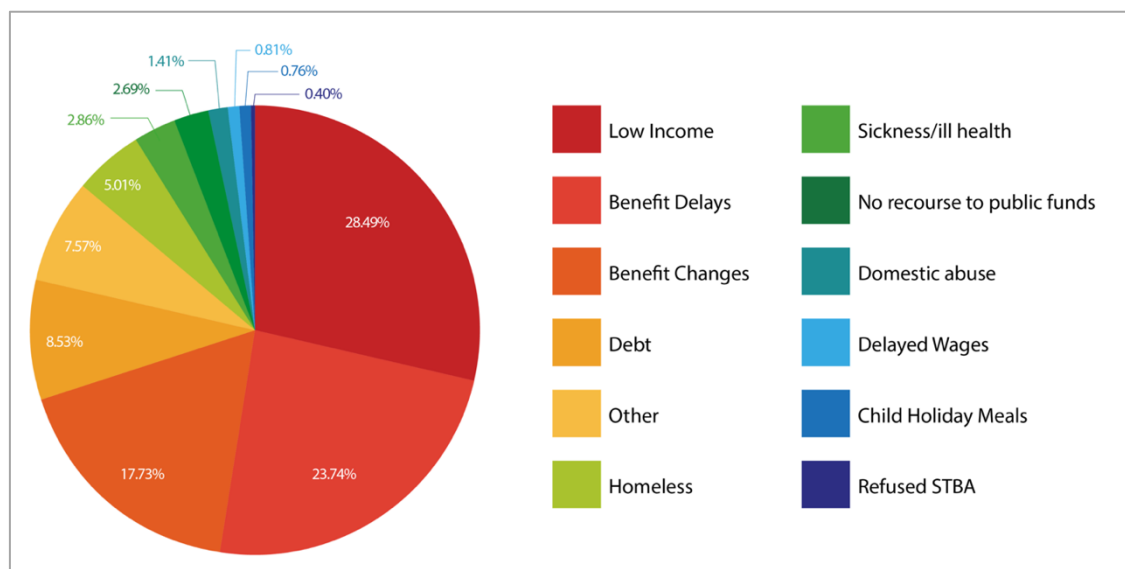
Figure 2: Primary reasons for food bank use 2017/18. (The Trussell Trust, 2018b).

At this point, I should reiterate that the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network account for only 58% of all food bank provision in the UK. With 1,393 food bank outlets, the Trussell Trust may be the leading food bank network in the UK, but they are not the only players. Over the past ten or so years, other independent food banks have

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[6] Benefit sanctioning is when the DWP reduce or stop benefit payments for a period of time – it is a form of 'discipline' employed when welfare claimants are deemed to have not fulfilled the 'conditions' of their welfare contract. E.g., when people miss or are late to an appointment with their 'work coach' at the Jobcentre, or if the work coach decides that a JSA claimant is not actively looking for work.

emerged, 1052 of which have been identified by the 'Independent Food Aid Network' (IFAN). This means that, at a minimum, there are currently 2445 food bank outlets operating in the UK, which tells us that the scale of food bank use is much higher than figures reported by the Trussell Trust. Furthermore, IFAN estimate that there are more than 3,000 food aid providers in the UK operating outside of the food bank model (Independent Food Aid Network, 2021), and when we consider that food banks are often perceived as a 'last resort' (Garthwaite, 2016a) for people experiencing hardship, the data captured by the Trussell Trust barely scratches the surface of the scale of food insecurity indicated by the 2019-2020 Family Resources Survey. Leaving much still to be explored, which is why this thesis focuses on experiences of food insecurity in three different models of food aid.

1.3 BRISTOL

The context for this thesis is the city of Bristol, which is one of the wealthier 'core' cities in the UK. Known for being an innovative, culturally vibrant, and politically and environmentally progressive city, Bristol was named the 'best place to live' in Britain in both 2014 and 2017 (BBC, 2017), and the best place to live outside of London for under 26-year-olds in 2019 (O'Malley, 2019). This vibrancy is reflected in the food scene in Bristol, where there has been a boom over the past ten years in restaurants, cafés, street food and takeaways (Murray & Gouk, 2019), and in city-wide work on local, just and sustainable food systems. Indeed, as I write this, Bristol has just been recognised as a 'Gold' standard 'Sustainable Food City' following a two-year city-wide campaign. However, another reality of the 'best place to live', is the production and perpetuation of inequality in the city. And as a popular place to live, Bristol has seen rapid population growth in recent years, particularly within central inner-city areas, which has caused overcrowding, displacement of communities through processes of gentrification, and rising levels of inequality between and within wards.

Despite being a 'foodie' city with an abundant food supply, food insecurity is rising, and according to data published earlier this year, one in every twenty households in Bristol experienced 'severe' or 'moderate' forms of food insecurity during 2019/20, rising to one in every eight households in certain areas of the city (Bristol City

Council, 2021[7]). While we know that financial hardship is the primary cause of food insecurity, access and availability of food – to fresh, affordable, socially and culturally appropriate food – shapes how food insecurity is lived and felt. And as a sprawling city, Bristol is shaped and connected by distinct neighbourhoods, which have different food challenges. For example, some areas, particularly in the South of Bristol are considered 'food deserts', where a lack of shops and supermarkets mean that people have limited access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables. While in other areas, such as Central-East Bristol there is better access to fresh produce – but not everywhere – and also a higher density of fast-food and takeaway outlets, leading to areas being classified as 'food swamps', which can bring their own health challenges. For example, according to a 2016 study (Webster et al., 2016), Easton and Lawrence Hill – located in Central-East Bristol where much of this research takes place – have 66 fast food takeaways. A staggering number compared to more affluent parts of the city, like Clifton, where there are only seven. This inequality between areas is reflected in public health data, where there is an alarming gap in 'healthy life expectancy' (16.3 years for men, and 16.7 years for women) between the most and least deprived areas of the city (Bristol City Council, 2018).

Though access to, and availability of food does not simply refer to the prevalence of shops, supermarkets and takeaways, this example does offer an explanation for why exploring place is crucial for understanding how people experience food insecurity, and ultimately how and why they use food aid.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS & CONTRIBUTIONS

The aim of this thesis is to examine the everyday of food aid in East and East-Central Bristol. To explore both the food bank and the wider food aid landscape that has emerged under austerity, and to better understand the value and significance of food aid for those experiencing food insecurity. To do so, I take an ethnographic approach and explore three different models of food aid in depth; developing an understanding

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[7] This data was taken from the annual 'Quality of Life' survey. It should be noted that though a 'representative' city-wide questionnaire, there are significant gaps in response groups, which means that it is likely the rates of food insecurity are even higher than reported. In addition, it should also be noted that this data was collected prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, which means that current rates of food insecurity are likely to be far higher than reported.

of how they operate, why people use them, how they are experienced, and how people use them alongside other tactics for "getting by" (Lister, 2004). The three food aid sites in question include two food bank outlets run by the Trussell Trust; a community kitchen run by 'FoodCycle' – a charity who provide meals using surplus food; and a community food centre based on a growing site which is run in partnership between 'Real Economy', a Bristol-based Community Benefits Society & Food Co-operative, and 'Sims Hill Shared Harvest', a Community Supported Agriculture project. While these food aid initiatives operate in significantly different ways, they are each located within the geographical area of East and Central-East Bristol, were each established after 2010, and are each run with the intention of supporting people who are food insecure by providing a source of free food.

To address the aim of this thesis, I pose the following research questions:

1. **Why are there different approaches to food aid?**

   Recognising the diversity of food insecurity experiences, this question encapsulates two key questions – 'why do people need food aid?' and 'what support do food aid sites provide?'. In answering these questions, this thesis explores drivers of food insecurity - what the circumstances of 'service users' are (which in this thesis refers to anyone accessing food aid, though significantly, each food aid project has a unique term to describe service users); and considers the type and form of food provided in these sites, how long it is provided for, and what other support it provides beyond food.

2. **What happens in these spaces?**

   To address this question and develop a better understanding of the everyday of food aid, I look to the rhythms, rules and processes that make up the food bank, the community kitchen, and the community food centre. Examining how service users and food aid providers encounter one another and navigate the space.

3. **How are sites of food aid experienced?**

   As Sue's opening story tells us, there is an emotional dimension to food aid that has a significant impact on how these sites are experienced. To address

this, I draw on the voices of those who access these sites but also on ethnographic description to create a sense of place and atmosphere.

4. **What is the significance of food aid for people experiencing food insecurity?**

This question investigates how people use food aid in amongst other forms of support; and looks to understand how people 'get by' using food aid, and 'get by' outside of food aid.

Investigating these questions, this thesis joins an ever-growing body of literature examining the everyday lived experience of austerity measures in the UK; and speaks directly to those exploring food insecurity, and food aid in particular. In so doing, this thesis contributes to knowledge in four ways.

Firstly, as I have outlined above, it explores the food bank *and* the wider landscape of food aid, examining the ways in which different emergent models of food aid function, how they are used and experienced, and how they relate to the food bank, which gives greater context to the experience of food insecurity and why there are different models of food support.

Secondly, by exploring food aid sites within a bound geographical location – East Bristol – this thesis contributes a place-based approach to the study of food aid and food insecurity. It acknowledges the relational significance of these sites to their surroundings, and how place shapes (and is shaped by) everyday lived and felt experiences of food insecurity. But to give such context, it is important to recognise that place is not static, and changes over time – particularly with regards to a fast-moving food aid sector. As such, this study contributes a place-based approach to the study of food insecurity and food aid use, for the time between September 2017 and August 2018. Importantly, before the roll out of Universal Credit in Bristol and, of course, before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thirdly, this thesis contributes to literature on consumption practices by exploring food and decision-making – or everyday agency – in the context of food insecurity. This is approached in various ways, for example, by exploring interactions and

engagement with the food that is on offer within food aid sites; the ways in which food and resources are managed in the home; and importantly, how food is used to perform care – for the self, for others and for the environment. By exploring food insecurity and decision-making, I emphasise how food aid has become embedded in our society as a 'relational resource', and part of our support landscape.

Finally, and importantly, this thesis is an ethnography and, built on 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), centres the voices and experiences of those who have lived experience of food insecurity and who have often been excluded from these conversations.

1.5 THESIS OUTLINE

Chapter Two examines the theoretical and conceptual framework that informs this thesis, and focuses on poverty, precarity, food aid, choice and 'the encounter' to provide context, and to ground the empirical chapters. Chapter Three reflects on the research process and explains the methodology used in this thesis, while Chapter Four begins the journey into the empirical chapters. Recounting the experiences of three individuals, Chapter Four explores structural drivers of food insecurity and journeys into food aid. With a particular focus on welfare benefits and housing, this chapter illustrates how people are held in precarity and explores the emotional impact of financial and food insecurity.

Chapters Five through Ten explore the three different food aid sites. Chapters Five, Seven and Nine are mini 'place' chapters, which introduce the areas in which the food aid sites are situated; while Chapters Six, Eight and Ten examine the everyday of the food aid models.

Chapter Five explores 'Easton', an East-Central ward in Bristol, home to the two food bank outlets I investigate in Chapter Six, which examines the everyday of food banking. Exploring the different components of the model in practice, Chapter Six poses questions about the adequacy of food bank food and frames the food bank as a site of multiplicity, where care and discipline overlap and intersect.

In Chapter Seven, I look to 'Barton Hill' where the community kitchen is based. Barton Hill is another East-Central area of the city, but while it backs onto Easton, it is spatially distinct. In Chapter Eight I introduce the community kitchen, and by exploring the ways in which it functions, I highlight the value of such spaces, but also reveal how professionalisation of processes can limit agency and create distinct 'giver' and 'receiver' dynamics.

Chapter Nine is the final 'place' chapter and is where I introduce the contrasting natural and built environment surrounding the community food centre, found on the outskirts of East Bristol. In Chapter Ten I explore the community food centre and examine how it sought to 'do food aid differently' from the conventional food bank and food surplus models, highlighting the benefits and challenges of such an approach.

In Chapter Eleven, my final empirical chapter, I explore the significance of food aid by examining the ways in which people 'get by' using food aid, support from friends and family and by utilising thrift practices. In doing so, I show how agency is articulated even in constrained circumstances, to perform care for the self, others, and the environment.

Finally, the conclusion consolidates many of the key arguments, draws together observations on power and precarity, and explains why this thesis matters.

2. LITERATURE

In this chapter I draw together conceptual and empirical research exploring poverty, precarity, food insecurity, and food aid in order to frame the arguments and observations delivered in this thesis. Identifying gaps in knowledge that are addressed in later empirical chapters, this literature review is structured in four parts. The first section of the literature review builds on discussion from the introduction, focussing on the rise and normalisation of food aid and the state of food insecurity in the UK. The second section explores precarity and the emotional experience of poverty and food insecurity, highlighting discourse around 'the deserving and undeserving poor' and processes of 'othering'. This is followed by a section on the significance of choice and relationships when 'getting by' with food insecurity. Culminating in the final section, which addresses urban life, and the importance of paying attention to 'the encounter' within sites of food aid.

2.1 THE RISE OF FOOD AID

As I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, food insecurity is a significant and increasing phenomenon in the UK. Demand on community-based food aid has grown to reflect this need, and in the absence of government data into the scale of food insecurity, food bank data conveys an exponential rise in food insecurity in the years following the introduction of austerity. This is illustrated today by the presence of a Trussell Trust food bank in almost every local authority in the UK (The Trussell Trust, 2021); a significant expansion from 2009-10, prior to the introduction of austerity, when there were food banks in fewer than 30 local authorities (Loopstra, 2015). Over the past ten years in particular, food banks have become part of our welfare landscape (Power & Small, 2021), a response to the support chasm created or worsened by cuts to funding for local authorities and statutory services (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Food aid sites providing in-kind support for people experiencing financial hardship, through the distribution of free food, have become commonplace in the wake of these cuts, and food banks are the most recognisable model of this food aid. Said to illustrate the 'downloading of austerity' from "national to local government, and onto communities and individuals" (Strong, 2020a, p. 217), food banks demonstrate how responsibility for the public's welfare has shifted from

public institutions failing to cope due to budget cuts, onto communities and individuals, creating a 'localisation of responsibility' (Strong, 2020a). Significantly, in many circumstances, this responsibility shifts to the very communities and individuals already feeling the financial impact of austerity, creating a '*double bind*' for 'impoverished communities':

> "…concurrently dispossessing excluded groups through shifting policy priorities whilst at the same time placing a greater burden of responsibility upon these same groups." (Strong, 2020a, p. 211)

Approaching this from a slightly different angle, academics have also critiqued the rise of the food bank for shifting the way that society perceives the problem of food insecurity, by inadvertently creating an infrastructure which further enables the withdrawal of monetary support, "making possible the transition from cash transfers and income assistance to food transfers and aid in kind as a new marker of UK social policy" (Williams et al., 2016, p.2311). A sentiment which echoes Riches (2002, p. 648) warnings that, internationally, food banks allow governments to "look the other way", constructing food insecurity as a matter for charity and communities "rather than a political obligation and human right" (Williams et al., 2016, p.2294). Essentially depoliticising the issue of food insecurity by allowing us to believe that the problem is being met, thereby deflecting pressure on government to provide a solution to its root causes and in doing so, enabling socially constructed indifference (Riches, 1997b; Caplan, 2017; Lambie-Mumford, 2017). These arguments bring attention back to the introductory excerpt to this thesis, for while food banks have become part of the everyday welfare landscape, they do not have the power to address root causes of food insecurity that are driven by structural inequalities (Lambie-Mumford, 2017), instead they provide an 'in the meantime' band-aid solution to crisis (Cloke et al., 2016).

2.1.1 RISING PREVALENCE OF FOOD SURPLUS

Importantly, while food banks are central to debates around food insecurity and food aid, in part because of the valuable insight gained through the data they collect, it

should be recognised that food banks are not the only emergent food aid model playing a role in the everyday provision of (community-based) welfare. Lesser explored sites of food aid provision have also played a key role, particularly evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic, where community-based food aid providers were vital to the crisis food response in Bristol (Lucas et al., 2021). These other sites of food aid are underexplored in academic research in comparison to the food bank, which is something that I address in this thesis.

Recognising that the wider food aid sector, beyond the food bank, is an underexplored 'gap' in the literature, this thesis also provides a comparative study of food aid, critically examining the food bank *and* other emergent forms of food aid, such as the food support provided through drop-in meals and food growing projects – projects which explicitly set out to tackle food insecurity. While some research has recognised the wider scale of food aid in the UK (Dowler & Lambie-Mumford, 2014; Power et al., 2017) these studies have not explored these sites from an ethnographic approach, consequently, do not capture the everyday and in-depth data produced through ethnographic study. Responding to calls for "'thicker' and more grounded accounts of austerity at scales beyond the nation-state and/or city alone" (Strong, 2020a, p. 211), this thesis explores the wider landscape of food aid through a localised place-based exploration of three models of food aid.

Alongside the rise of the food bank and what this illustrates about the shifting of responsibility to communities and individuals (Strong, 2020a; Power & Small, 2021), the use of food surplus to address food insecurity is another recent development worthy of attention, for over the past ten years surplus food has become an everyday food source for many food aid providers. While the use of food surplus has become normalised within these sites, it is important to recognise where this method of food sourcing sits within the wider food system and how it is particularly driven and supplied by supermarkets in the UK (Caplan, 2017; Spring et al., 2019).

While food banks sometimes distribute surplus food, it is utilised most by other providers of food aid who offer cooked meals, or food pantry-type models. Supermarkets are key suppliers of surplus food into these charitable or voluntary organisations, and vast amounts of surplus food past or nearing its 'best before' dates, or 'wonky' fruit and vegetables are being used by groups and organisations to

address food insecurity, either by turning it into a meal or through further redistribution of goods (Caplan, 2017; Spring et al., 2019). The vast majority of these food aid models work closely with larger infrastructure organisations like FareShare or Neighbourly who, as food redistribution charities, help to coordinate the redistribution of surplus. Describing and critiquing this movement of food as a 'win-win' scenario, Caplan (2017) found that there are two alleged 'win-win' scenarios at play in the redistribution of food surplus. Firstly, there is the alleged 'win-win' of rescuing food that would be otherwise become food waste and using this food to provide people experiencing food insecurity with access to free food. While secondly, there is a 'win-win' that applies to supermarkets – namely, that surplus food redistribution enables supermarkets to avoid the cost attributed to disposing of food waste, and at the same time they can 'look good' doing it. This latter point is intimately connected to supermarket's 'Corporate Social Responsibility' (CSR) policies, where the act of food redistribution produces "positive public relations and community capital" (Cloke et al., 2017, p. 706) for supermarkets like Tesco, whilst simultaneously saving them money on food waste disposal – which in turn reduces pressure on corporate supermarkets to review their food production processes in ways that would reduce the overproduction of food.

Though a relatively recent development in the UK, in North America, the existence of food banks and the repurposing of food surplus to address food insecurity is a well-documented phenomenon. Described as an 'industry' (Fisher, 2018) in the States, food banks operate slightly differently to the UK, more akin to FareShare in the UK, and are heavily reliant on partnerships with corporate supermarkets. Though the UK system does not currently partner with corporates to this extent, it is worth noting critiques that have emerged from North America in order to identify emerging similarities and understand the challenges that may be faced in the UK's food aid sector in the future. For example, resonating with Caplan's (2017) critique of the 'win-win' of food surplus and food insecurity, Lindenbaum (2016) conceptualises food banks in the United States as "re-gifting depots that are part of the capital accumulation process" (p. 376). According to Lindenbaum, donations to food banks benefit large donors and perpetuate systems that allow wealth disparity and food insecurity to be rife across the United States. Drawing on Maussian theory of 'the gift' (1967), Lindenbaum (2016) describes the food surplus exchange in terms of the

'original gift', finding that this is not the 'gifting' of food aid to people experiencing food insecurity, but the tax breaks given to corporations who donate; to farm subsidies; and to the avoidance of food waste costs to large farms, food processing companies and retail chains. Lindenbaum (2016) argues that this reflects the 'potlatch' of Native American tradition, in which the exchange of gifts maintains a social structure. Because in this context, food surplus is the 'gift', which maintains a system that perpetuates overabundance of food and ineffective treatment of poverty (Lindenbaum, 2016, p. 382).

Interestingly, though US specific, Lindenbaum's analysis does carry resonance with the UK and processes already visible within the food aid system; particularly when he points out that in many situations, the supermarkets donating waste food also contribute to the production of food insecurity by paying their staff low wages and employing them on insecure contracts. The precarity of which leads many to use food banks themselves. A phenomenon also identified in the UK by Williams et al. (2016) who found that supermarkets were donating to food banks that their staff themselves use, and that zero-hour contracts or low-wage contracts commonly used by supermarkets were seen to be a leading reason for many using food banks.

Though food surplus is not the focus of this research, it is important to recognise the important role it plays in the provision of food aid, particularly because it enables groups to actively engage with addressing food insecurity on little to no income. Because of its low-cost, the use of food surplus in sites of food aid continues to increase, and being aware of the challenges and long-term implications of embedding and normalising the use of surplus food is important. Not just with regards to the knock-on effects across the wider food system, but because the materiality of food used in these sites has an impact on how they are experienced, as I will explore in the third section of this literature review.

2.1.2 FOOD INSECURITY RISK FACTORS

As I have already stated, austerity policies have disproportionately affected low-income households and communities (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). To give greater

context to the rise of food aid in the UK, it is important to understand who is most likely to experience food insecurity.

Just as the impact of austerity has not been felt evenly across the UK geographically, we know that the experience of food insecurity is not one felt equally across society, as certain groups are more likely to be at risk of food insecurity than others. Examining correlations with food insecurity, recent quantitative data published by the DWP (2021) found that over two fifths (43%) of households in receipt of Universal Credit experience low, or very low food security – five times higher than the national average (8%) – highlighting the strong correlation between welfare policy under austerity and the prevalence of food insecurity. Other findings reveal the prevalence of those experiencing food insecurity and living on a low income and/or with a limited capacity for work. Conveying this, approximately a third (31%) of working age households living in social housing experience food insecurity, in comparison to just 3% of homeowners; almost a third (29%) of single-parent households experience food insecurity; a quarter (25%) of households that have one or more unemployed adults of working age experience food insecurity; and a fifth (19%) of households with one or more disabled adults of working age. In addition to this, the DWP found that a fifth (19%) of black households' experience food insecurity (Cooper, 2021), highlighting the significance of paying attention to 'intersecting inequalities' when exploring how austerity is lived and felt (Hall et al., 2017).

These findings are reinforced by studies conducted with food bank clients across the UK. For while food insecurity has only recently been measured by UK government, there have been a number of research projects that have highlighted those who are most at risk of food insecurity through proxy measures such as food bank use. Most notably, Loopstra & Lalor (2017) conducted a study of food bank clients in England, Wales and Scotland between 2016 and 2017, and found that the following groups were over-represented in the food bank in comparison to the profile of low-income households in the UK: lone parent households; larger families (more than two children); single men; households that include someone with a disability and/or health condition; and refugees and asylum seekers. The majority of food bank clients were found to be between 25 and 49 years old; social renters; were unemployed and

in receipt of one or more benefits; and that those in receipt of conditionality-related ESA and JSA were overrepresented in the food bank in comparison to welfare claimants. Findings which resonate with both Prayogo et al.'s (2017) study of food bank use in London, and MacLeod et al.'s (2018) study in Glasgow. Interestingly, single males were the most prevalent household type in the food bank, and in their study of repeat food bank use, Garratt (2017) found that higher numbers of visits were particularly associated with one-person households. This observation is particularly significant when considering the higher prevalence of single males also attending other underexplored food aid settings, such as the Community Kitchen discussed in chapter 8.

2.2 PRECARITY AND THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF FOOD INSECURITY

As exemplified in chapter 4, a state of 'precarity' connects these at-risk factors, a state of being described as "instability, ambiguity, uncertainty, and the social suffering that follows suit" (Dolson, 2015, p. 119). Precarity is central to the experience of food insecurity and to the prevalence of food aid, for unlike 'precariousness', which is shared, relational, and "a condition of every life" (Lorey, 2015, p.11), 'precarity' is a specific form of precariousness, which is "politically induced" with "uneven spatial and social implications for the production of inequality" (Petrova, 2018, p.19). It denotes "the striation and distribution of precariousness in relations of inequality" and, "accompanies the processes of *othering*" (Lorey, 2015, p.12, italics in original), exemplified through the vilification of poverty, food bank use and food insecurity more broadly (Caplan, 2017; Pemberton et al., 2017; Wells & Caraher, 2014; Price et al., 2020).

Connecting these experiences, Standing (2011) refers to people who experience precarity as forming a new heterogeneous 'class-in-the-making' called the 'Precariat', explaining that the Precariat are those in our society "without an anchor of stability" (Standing, 2011, p. 1). Arguing that their precarity is an outcome of the neoliberal economic model popularised since the 1970s and mobilised through the political employment of austerity, Standing finds the Precariat to have little security, suffering from the 'four A's': anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation. Significantly, Standing (2011) explains that:

"One may depict a process of 'falling' into the precariat or of being dragged into a precariatised existence. People are not born in it and are unlikely to identify themselves as members with a glow of pride. Fear, yes; anger, probably; sardonic humour, perhaps; but not pride." (p. 22)

For this reason, the Precariat have been described as 'dangerous' because they are not a 'solidified' class (Standing, 2011, p. 25). Tensions within the Precariat prevent them from recognising commonalities between their situations, and from identifying social and economic structures which create their state of precarity. Instead, they blame other subgroups of the Precariat for their situation – evidenced by the low-income worker or unemployed citizens blaming migrants for stealing 'British' jobs, or the 'welfare-scrounger' for receiving supposedly 'better' support than is afforded through paid labour (Standing, 2011).

Such understandings of precarity and the formation of the Precariat are useful for understanding the rise in food aid, and for considering the emotional and psychological dimensions of food insecurity, food aid use, and poverty, as this dynamic particularly resonates with processes of stigma, shame and 'distancing' of poverty related to the notion of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.

2.2.1 FOOD INSECURITY AND THE DESERVING AND UNDESERVING POOR

In her ethnography of a food bank in Stockton-on-Tees, Garthwaite (2016a, 2016c) found that accessing the food bank can often be a stigmatising experience and one wrought with feelings of shame and embarrassment; findings that resonate with a number of other research findings (Butler, 2014; Caplan, 2016; Cloke et al., 2017; Denning, 2021; Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014; MacLeod et al., 2018; Purdam et al., 2016; Strong, 2020b; Van der Horst et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2016; Wimer et al., 2012). These experiences are said to be the 'hidden costs' of food aid (Purdam et al., 2016), and do not necessarily directly result from encounters within the food bank or food aid site itself, but from a "wider stigmatising culture of 'othering'" in our society, "which constructs poverty as personal failure" (Power & Small, 2021, p.3). Public debate surrounding food banks, food insecurity, and poverty have often been

essentialised within the scope of such behavioural explanations of poverty, embedding the notion of the 'deserving and undeserving poor' within national cultural consciousness (Pemberton et al., 2017). For example, a dominant narrative to see in the media, particularly during the early years of austerity, has been that which casts benefit recipients, or food banks users, as a homogeneous group of 'shirkers' or 'failures' – 'scrounging' off the welfare system, making poor budgeting decisions and unhealthy consumption choices (Caplan, 2017; Pemberton et al., 2017; Wells & Caraher, 2014; Price et al., 2020). Though public rhetoric has shifted somewhat in recent years, these notions still persist, and the 'solution' to food insecurity and poverty is still often framed in terms of education and self-discipline.

Like the media, government have also been instrumental in the formation of such 'deserving and undeserving' interpretations of poverty, food insecurity, and food aid use, which has helped to create an alternative explanation for this phenomenon to the impact of austerity itself (Cloke et al., 2017, p. 711). Indeed, by projecting responsibility onto the individual, the government have framed poverty as a question of moral character and a lack of knowledge and skills, rather than a socio-economic problem created by structural inequality. Inexplicably, by presenting food insecurity as a separate issue from welfare reform and austerity, the government have managed to frame hunger as a 'lifestyle choice' (Cloke et al., 2017, p. 711). An understanding of food insecurity that is rooted in neoliberal ideology which, with regards to poverty, understands individuals to be responsible for their own outcomes. And in which the government employ the notion of 'fairness' as a powerful discursive device to drive this 'deserving and undeserving' rhetoric within welfare, by constructing a dichotomy between those who 'contribute to' and those who are 'dependent on' the state (Pemberton et al., 2017, p. 24). The result of this, "recasts social protection as a generous gift from 'us' to 'them'" (Wiggan, 2012, p. 390), and mobilises public vilification of benefit claimants who fail to reciprocate the 'welfare gift' (Pemberton et al., 2017). As food banks function by distributing food that the public themselves pick out and donate, you can see how such notions of 'gifts' and responsibility could easily translate and intensify in this context.

Drawing on Goldstein's (2001) 'ideology of blame', such explanations of poverty can become internalised, leading to a process of self-blame where those in poverty

believe their situation to be a consequence of a form of deviancy, or fault of their own that "needs to be reformed" (Dolson, 2015, p. 130). Though while people experiencing such forms of precarity have been found to frame their pathway into poverty in terms of personal failure, they have also been able to contextualise their experiences within wider constraining factors (work, cost of living etc.) that influence their behaviour, thereby rejecting the notion that behaviour alone drives poverty (Pemberton et al., 2017, p. 25). Similarly, Pemberton et al. (2017) also found that very few participants were willing to self-identify as 'poor'. A finding that is perhaps unsurprising, as we "live in a state that mystifies and vilifies the poor as being separate from 'us'" (Garthwaite, 2016a, p. 137), and "given its negative connotations, a person is unlikely to want to own it publicly" (Lister, 2004, p. 151).

Highlighting the intersections with Standing's (2011) Precariat, people living in poverty actively distance themselves from 'the poor' in ways that reproduce the 'deserving and undeserving' rhetoric (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013; Garthwaite, 2016a; Pemberton et al., 2017). In their study investigating how people caught up in the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' talk about poverty, Shildrick & MacDonald (2013) found that interviewees denied their poverty, and by rejecting this label, constructed a self-identity that distinguished them from those who were seen as less deserving of support. Describing themselves as 'hard up' not 'poor', and able to 'cope' with limited resources, they positioned themselves in contrast to:

> *"...a (usually) nameless mass of 'Others' who were believed, variously, to be work-shy, to claim benefits illegitimately and to be unable to 'manage' and to engage in blameworthy consumption habits. It was them upon whom the stigma of poverty was cast." (p. 291, italics in original)*

Shildrick & Macdonald (2013) found that this process of distancing and 'othering' occurred because of four key factors. Firstly, they found that people did not see themselves as poor because close comparisons, socially or geographically, diminished a sense of relative deprivation. Their friends, family and neighbours all experienced similar hardships and therefore their circumstances were not unusual, but 'normal'. Secondly, Shildrick & MacDonald found that their perceptions of

poverty were heavily influenced by media and political discourse perpetuating 'scroungerphobia', and the shame and stigma attached to poverty and welfare. Thirdly, they found that pressure to disassociate with 'the poor' and the 'welfare dependent' worked alongside a more general class disidentification within which, the working class has become demonised. And finally, they theorised that 'ruling ideas' about the 'undeserving poor' are more easily adopted when there is a diminishing politicised, working-class consciousness. A finding that resonates with Standing's (2011) Precariat.

Understanding the emotional dimensions of poverty and food insecurity is crucial for examining the everyday of food aid, and in this thesis, I contribute to such discourse around stigma, shame, embarrassment and processes of distancing by illustrating how this plays out in underexplored sites of food aid, as well as in pathways into food insecurity in chapter 4, and within decision-making around food provisioning in chapter 11.

2.3 CHOICE, EXPECTATIONS OF BEHAVIOUR AND 'GETTING BY'

Food is intimately tied to identity, creating and nurturing who we are and how we understand ourselves (Panayi, 2008). In circumstances of food insecurity, when meals are provided by community kitchens or food banks with limited choice, it could be reasoned that people are placed "within emplotted stories or narratives of identity not of their own making" (Valentine, 1999, p. 496). Exploring the ways that people engage with the materiality of food within sites of food aid can help us to understand the implications that such limitations of choice have on individuals' narratives of self (Somers, 1994), and how culturally significant foods or food preferences may be reinforced or relinquished during times of austerity.

In Western constructions of citizenship, the capacity to have 'choice' is a defining feature (Bauman, 1998; Salonen, 2016). In their study of food banks at Christmastime in Finland, Salonen (2016) describes how contemporary (western) society is a consumer society, which "engages its members primarily as consumers and in which people construct and maintain their identities by taking part in consumer culture" (Salonen, 2016, p. 872). Drawing on Bauman (1998), Salonen

(2016) observes that people "who lack the means to participate in the consumerist way of life face social exclusion" (p. 872), and in the context of food aid, describes food bank clients as 'secondary consumers', for they cannot participate in primary consumption practices. Freedom of choice is said to be identified by the 'ability to not choose' to do something (Sassatelli, 2001), as much by the decision to do something. And, relating this to Christmas, where food bank clients reported that they were not participating in the holiday, Salonen (2016) finds that "the refusal to celebrate is not an act of manifesting one's ability to not choose, but a forced behaviour which, on the contrary, verifies their exclusion from society" (p. 881). Importantly, such understandings of choice, and experiences of constrained or 'secondary' consumption are also found in everyday experiences of food insecurity. Considering the impact of choice on marking social inclusion or social isolation, lack of choice can be said to be a stigmatising factor in sites of food aid. Consequently, it is important to consider the impact of limited choice on the emotional wellbeing and physical health of food aid consumers, something that I draw out in this thesis.

2.3.1 CHOICE, BEHAVIOUR AND RECIPROCITY

There are certain behavioural expectations in sites of food aid that render 'choice' contentious. There is an expectation that the recipient of food will be grateful for what they receive, and that when this expectation is not met, food aid providers may doubt whether the client is truly in need (Caplan, 2016; Cloke et al., 2017; Garthwaite, 2016a; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005; Van der Horst et al., 2014). In Garthwaite's (2016a) ethnography of a food bank she highlights this when describing an encounter in which a food bank client gave back food from their food parcel, exclaiming "I won't eat just anything", a reaction that shocked the food bank volunteers (p. 81). Caplan (2016) describes similar encounters, where clients who returned foods, asking for 'better' brands were seen by volunteers to be "behaving inappropriately" (p. 8). Van der Horst et al. (2014) describe an 'undesired behaviour' in complaining about the quality of food given, whilst May et al. (2020, p. 215) find that "any attempts by clients to exercise a choice of what food they might receive – whether because they do not like, cannot eat, or simply do not need particular items – is often read as evidence that they cannot be in 'real need'". An extreme reaction to a perceived lack of gratitude was recorded by Tarasuk and Eakin (2005) when

researching food bank use in Canada. They found that in food banks where clients had little opportunity to exercise choice in what foods they received, unwanted food was often left outside the food bank on the floor. There was a "pervasive belief among workers that clients who were truly hungry would gratefully accept any food they were offered" (p. 183) and so in response to this phenomenon, some volunteers concluded they were not really in need of food aid and proceeded to deny the service to those individuals in future. Resonating with Salonen's (2016) discourse on primary and secondary consumers, Caplan (2016) reflects on those who seek to 'swap' food in the food bank, stating that "this demand to have a modicum of choice in what they take away may be understood as a claim to be treated, at least to some degree, like everyone else, who does have a 'choice' in what they eat" (p. 8), and viewed as a way of asserting agency, gaining control over the situation and reclaiming dignity and identity in the process. So, when individuals are penalised for attempting to exercise choice in this context, it is a reminder that as 'secondary consumers' they do not have the same 'primary consumer' right to complain (Salonen, 2016), highlighting the power imbalance at play.

When considering choice within food aid sites, the quality and nutritional value of food distributed by food aid providers has often come into question. In their study of 'non-use' of food assistance in America, Wimer et al. (2013) found that one of the main reasons people did not like to use food pantries[8] was because the food was perceived to be of low quality. While in their study of food banks in the Netherlands, Van der Horst et al. (2014) found that the substandard quality of foods received, often nearing or past it's best before date, as well as the high proportion of 'junk' foods included in the food parcels was a cause for embarrassment for food bank clients. Van der Horst et al. (2014) argue that for many, the preparation of balanced, healthy meals is associated with adulthood; therefore, the high proportion of sweet foods donated insinuated a childishness or lack of responsibility and know-how with cooking, which relates back to the notion that poverty is connected to lack of skill and knowledge. While the use of food surplus, has perpetuated feelings of embarrassment and worthlessness because of the perception that the food they have received is 'spoiled' and 'leftover' – food that would otherwise have gone to landfill,

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[8] The American equivalent of UK food banks

or to feed pigs (Van der Horst et al., 2014; Caraher & Furey, 2018). Though some academics have mentioned the limitations of food provision appropriate for people's cultural backgrounds (Caraher & Furey, 2018; Power et al., 2017), few have explored this in depth, a gap in the literature that I explore in this thesis, particularly with regards to the food bank.

Drawing on Hill and Gaines (2007), Van der Horst et al. (2014) write that, "it is in the embodied experience of products we consume, and in the consciousness that some products are out of our reach, that people experience their social positioning at the strongest" (p. 1515). Adding to this, Caplan's (2017) theorising on 'the gift' of food aid illustrates that it is not just in the consciousness that products are out of reach, but in the gifting or receipt of food that we can also experience our social positioning. For example, applying Mauss' theory of 'the gift' to the food bank, Caplan (2016) describes the exchange of food from food bank volunteer to the food bank client as the 'pure' gift – a gift given without any expectation of reciprocation. Referencing Laidlaw (2000), she states that, "this kind of gift, unlike other forms, does not create social relations between giver and receiver who thus, inevitably, have totally different statuses" (Caplan, 2016, p. 8). However, by accepting the gift of food, the food bank client accepts a lower status, highlighting "the power involved in the gift giving" (Caplan, 2017, p. 18), similarly, the consumption of food that is seen to lack in nutrition would also be an act of lowering oneself.

Reflecting on such dynamics, it is perhaps unsurprising that many food bank clients go on to donate to, or volunteer at a food bank, in order to 'give back' an imagined debt (Caplan, 2016; Garthwaite, 2017) – something that Strong (2020a) describes as 'interdependency' – for through such acts of reciprocity, they are reasserting their agency to choose, to give, and by doing so raising their status (Caplan, 2017). While reciprocity is a well explored phenomenon in other areas of research, the ways in which models of food aid function, enabling or restricting choice and reciprocity, is underexplored in studies on experiences of food insecurity and food aid. An area of research that is addressed in this thesis.

2.3.2 AGENCY UNDER FINANCIAL CONSTRAINT

In a context where the cost of living and insecure and low-paid work is increasing, where welfare rates are declining in real terms, and where the impact of Brexit and COVID-19 is unclear, it is unsurprising that within an already stretched household income, the food budget is often seen as the most elastic part and is reduced in order to cover the costs of other essentials (Caplan, 2017). For low-income households, essential goods and services take up a relatively larger share of the household budget than more affluent households (Tinson et al., 2014), and many low-income households are victim to 'poverty premiums' such as pre-payment meters in their homes, which significantly increase the day-to-day cost of basic infrastructure essentials (Schmuecker, 2017). Poverty premiums further compound the necessity for elasticity in the food budget, which has an emotional and psychological impact, for as Miller (1998, p.69) states, "shopping under the constraint of necessity is likely to be viewed as work"; a sentiment echoed by Garthwaite (2017) who observes that poverty requires "complex daily 'work', such as tight budgeting practices, skipping meals, caring for children, friends, and family members, and being faced with the decision to 'heat or eat'" (p. 288).

Lister's (2004) work on agency and poverty can help explore decision-making under such constrained circumstances, providing an important theoretical framework for this thesis. In her seminal text '*Poverty*', Lister outlines four different ways in which people exercise agency in poverty, which are charted across 'everyday' (juggling resources to make ends meet) to 'strategic' (decisions such as taking on paid employment), as well as 'personal' (an individual's livelihood) to 'political/citizenship' (decisions made to effect wider change) forms of agency (see Figure 3). Everyday forms of agency include 'getting by' – trying to manage with limited resources; and 'getting (back) at' poverty – such as participating in undisclosed work (which Lister (2015) describes as a form of 'everyday resistance' (Scott, 1985)). Strategic forms of agency comprise of 'getting out' – for example, through paid employment; and 'getting organised' – which involves taking collective action to challenge public rhetoric and the structures which create and exacerbate poverty.

```
                              Everyday
                                 |
                                 |
          'Getting by'           |        'Getting (back) at'
                                 |
                                 |                              Political/
Personal ────────────────────────────────────────────────     Citizenship
                                 |
                                 |
          'Getting Out'          |        'Getting Organized'
                                 |
                                 |
                              Strategic
```
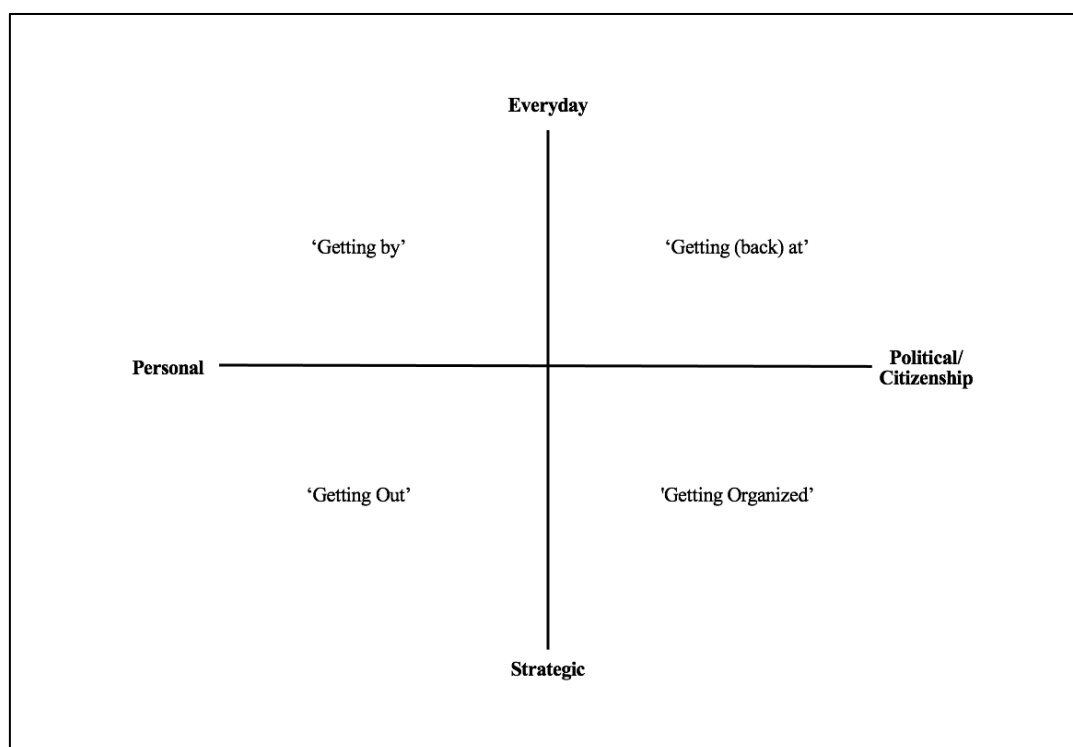
Figure 3: Forms of agency exercised by people in poverty. Lister (2004, p. 130). Reproduced by author.

Lister's work on agency is particularly useful for thinking through the everyday lived experience of food insecurity, for it recognises and values the often-overlooked forms of agency exercised in constrained circumstances, something that I explore in the context of food insecurity in this thesis.

2.3.3 RELATIONSHIPS, 'GETTING BY' AND FOOD PROVISIONING

As I mentioned in the introduction, food banks and food aid more generally are often considered to be a 'last resort' for people experiencing food insecurity (Garthwaite, 2016a), and studies have shown that informal networks of support – illustrated through food sharing between friends, family members and informal networks (Miller, 1998) – have an incredibly important role in helping people to make do and 'get by' when food insecure and can provide an alternative to emergency food services (Power et al., 2017; Wimer et al., 2013). But this is not the extent to which relationships come to hold significance during the experience of food insecurity, where the act of food provisioning – the process and what is provided – can reveal

expressions of care in unexpected forms, something that this thesis builds upon in chapter 11.

Exploring decision-making in such circumstances, research has paid particular attention to familial relationships and responsibility. In 'A Theory of Shopping', Miller (1998) explores the dynamics of food shopping in an ethnographic study of North London residents. Finding that 'love' for others carried immense meaning throughout the process of sourcing food, he argues that "shopping does not merely reflect love, but is a major form in which this love is manifested and reproduced" (p. 18). For some, an act of love may mean purchasing their child's favourite cereal, or love may be produced in the purchasing of nutritious foods for the betterment of their family's health; alternatively, when living on a low income, the act of love may manifest in the anxiety surrounding sourcing enough food for the family to eat. One way in which this is tackled in the book is through the employment of 'thrift', in which people weigh up quality and price of food to get the best value for money (thrift is discussed in more depth in chapter 0). However, there are more physical and immediate ways in which food scarcity is tackled, and research shows that parents try to shield their children from becoming aware of food insecurity (Harvey, 2016; Chen, 2016), namely by skipping meals themselves to ensure their children have enough to eat. In their study, Harvey (2016) found that not only did parents have high levels of anxiety regarding food, often skipping meals, or many days' worth of meals to ensure that their children had enough to eat, but that their children often skipped meals themselves or went to bed hungry, sometimes without their parents being aware of this. And while Harvey's work shows food insecurity to be an issue that affects all members of the household, whether this is known or not known by the parents, research has shown that mothers are more likely to be affected because they prioritise their children and/or partner when distributing food at mealtimes, often skipping meals to ensure they have enough to eat (Caplan, 2017).

Another way in which parents shield their children from food insecurity resonates with Salonen's (2016) theorising on social exclusion within consumer society. Discussing the incorporation of 'junk food' as 'treats' in low-income families in America, Chen (2016) found that eating junk food was valued as a 'normal' food practice in the States, which meant that in particular contexts, namely, where the

mother had been unable to afford to eat 'treats' herself as a child, then as a parent, they were more likely to give these foods to their children to show them, and themselves, that they were not deprived. In doing so, they are showing that they can provide in a way, 'like everyone else'. A sentiment also found in Burns et al.'s (2013) work in which the purchasing of 'comfort' foods was seen to alleviate discomfort and anxiety, and enabled the individual to not 'feel' poor.

Coming back to the notion of food insecure households making poor consumption choices, it is important to note that whilst there is certainly a connection between obesity, malnutrition and financial hardship, in most cases it is not a matter of being 'unknowledgeable' of healthy eating practices (Chen, 2016). Relating this to families, Chen (2016) finds that the influence of poverty impacts greatly on the quality of foods that mothers can provide for their children, as their focus is on providing a high quantity of food in the most cost-effective way. This means that calorie-dense foods, such as takeaways or convenience foods, can provide a cheap way of sourcing enough food, and when time-poor, provide a quick alternative to cooking from scratch (Chen, 2016; Miller, 1998). Meah and Jackson (2017) define convenience foods as "items that are ready to cook, ready to heat, or ready to eat" (p. 2066), and in everyday practice, their incorporation in people's diets is not perceived in opposition to cooking from scratch. Indeed, Meah and Jackson (2017, p. 2073) explore how convenience foods can be used as an 'expression of care' and find that the ways in which people use food as a way of 'caring well' for their families is a matter of interpretation and reliant on context.

2.4 ENCOUNTERS, FOOD AID AND URBAN LIFE

While recipients of food aid have described food banks as warm and non-judgemental spaces (Garthwaite, 2016a), these sites have also been found to be spaces of ambiguity where encounters between staff/volunteers and clients have the capacity to articulate social difference and perpetuate stigma, but also of positive transformation and the reworking of "ethical and political attitudes, beliefs and identities" (Williams et al., 2016, p. 2301). These encounters have the potential to foster positive and negative interactions and dynamics and as such need closer examination. Similarly, Cloke et al. (2017, p. 706) reflect on the significance of

paying attention to these sites of encounters, because though food banks have "become inextricably mired in the neoliberal politics of their context, [where] no possible good can be seen in them", they are also sites of possibility, where people from a range of backgrounds share an encounter within the 'liminal space' of the food bank. This has potential for an "in-common encounter" (Cloke et al., 2017, p. 709), which fosters political and ethical values and identities that challenge neoliberal austerity. In so doing, Cloke et al. (2017) highlight the potentiality of these spaces, illustrating why it is important to look at the everyday lived experience, to understand the 'messiness' of real life and what happens in these spaces. Where this is still need for such explorations in the context of food banking, particularly considering the heterogeneous spaces of food banks across localities, it is an underexplored area of research in other emergent sites of food aid in Bristol, which I address in this thesis.

As Wilson (2017) explains, 'the encounter' holds an important role in urban theory and human geography. Where Amin and Thrift (2002) have long proposed that the city is itself *made from* encounters, Massey (2005) has argued that urban space is under constant construction because it is a product of a multiplicity of encounters, whilst Stevens (2007) purports that chance encounters give urban life its 'distinctive character' (Wilson, 2017, p. 454). More often than not, these engagements with 'the encounter' have focused on the possibility of positive cultural transformation that frames the city as a site of contact, of hybridisation of culture in public spaces leading to the dissolving of cultural difference and animosity – what has been called the 'cosmopolitan turn' (Valentine, 2008, pp. 323-325). However, encounters "never take place in a space free from history, material conditions, and power" (Valentine, 2008, p. 333), and to consider encounters as meaningful only if a positive transformation is experienced, is to obscure the power dynamics at play. For it is possible that an encounter can be transformative for one party, but not for another (Valentine, 2008).

For example, descriptions of such multicultural encounters primarily focus on the perspective of the majority group – or the powerful – and in doing so marginalises "a plurality of perspectives and give[s] clear implications for how encounters are named, understood and identified as 'meaningful'" (Wilson, 2017, p. 461). Such

power dynamics are present within encounters between people of different socio-economic as well as cultural backgrounds. As Wilson (2017) argues, when something is recognised as meaningful, we also create value, and therefore we must consider *who* determines what is a valuable encounter. For what we determine to be the aim behind the encounter is also important in how meaning is framed. If the purpose of contact is to enable social cohesion, then any encounter that fails to do so, or actively works against this aim, can be considered meaning*less*. Such labelling risks obscuring the ways in which encounters matter, in favour of positive transformations. It is therefore important to remember that an encounter is an "event of relation" (Wilson, 2017, p. 464) and as such *is* possibility – for good or bad, depending on the context.

This is where Dawney's (2013) work on 'the interruption' is useful, for by paying attention to encounters which manifest as disruption – affecting the body and disrupting "the flow of experience, that is both habitual and yet not" (Dawney, 2013, p. 628) – the encounter enables us to critically interrogate 'normal' or everyday practices, ways of thinking and processes of subjectivation, helping to reveal the power dynamics and positionalities which shape our everyday lives. In the context of food aid, paying attention to such encounters, often illustrated through the experience of discomfort, can illustrate the contradictions at play in food aid provision, convey the ambiguity present within these spaces and help to centre the voices and experiences of those accessing these spaces. A good example of which would be the disruption of gratitude displayed by food bank clients in Garthwaite's ethnography exemplified in section 2.3.1.

2.4.1 URBAN LIFE

Recent theoretical work on propinquity and geographies of encounter are particularly useful for examining urban life in the context of cultural and socio-economic difference in the city. Pursuing a place-based approach to the study of food insecurity and food aid, it's important to acknowledge the urban life forming the backdrop to this thesis. Life in the city has often been stereotyped with representations that place 'community' and 'solitude', or 'rural' and 'urban' at odds with one another – where the city has historically been portrayed as having a "peculiar kind of loneliness that

one finds in the middle of a crowd" (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 8). Moving beyond such interpretations, Tonkiss (2005) explains how key urban theorists have shifted to a more nuanced interpretation, which reimagines the city as a site possible of both. Resonating with the possibility of the encounter, Tonkiss emphasises how people negotiate space and social relationships in ways that shape different versions of the city that interweave or insulate individuals from one another. Community, solitude, difference, and indifference are created through these processes, and as such the city can be seen as a site of possibility.

Exemplifying this, Painter (2012) frames the city as a site possible of community *and* loneliness, proposing that the neighbour, as a 'near-dweller' has "no particular social relationship beyond dwelling nearby" (p. 523), but has the potential to draw people into relationships outside of networks of friends and family. Proximity, or propinquity, matters because it gives people the opportunity to interact. Crucially, Painter emphasises that such interactions through propinquity are not always actualised, and if they are created, are not always loving, which "is precisely the point" (Painter, 2012, p. 524). Propinquity enables the possibility of relationships, or positive transformations through encounters, but they do not always take this form. While Painter questions the conflated 'community' in David Cameron's 'Big Society' (2010-2015) and the responsibility being placed on 'the neighbour' within this political agenda, it is clear that propinquity is particularly relevant to experiences of poverty and social isolation in the UK. Indeed, in a city where much of poverty alleviation is provided by the voluntary and charitable sector, the chance of encounter through propinquity, giving space to 'word of mouth', and community support is crucial for those experiencing hardship. Well evidenced by the rise of mutual aid groups over the past year of the pandemic. But the potentiality of propinquity is also important to think with when considering sites of food aid themselves. For informal encounters with strangers or neighbours in sites of food aid could lead to unexpected support, or alternately, a lack of recognition could leave people feeling more isolated and alone. Importantly, Painter (2012, p. 531) states, the "materiality of the city matters as more than a simple backdrop", for it is not just the proximity of living that facilitates possibility, but the rhythms of everyday life in public and semi-public urban spaces that hold such encounters. Of particular relevance for this thesis, where sites of food aid operate for limited periods of time,

within specific locations. In times of financial and food insecurity, sites of food aid can be seen as such crossing places of everyday life.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have outlined conceptual and empirical work that informs this thesis and gives context to an ethnographic, cross-site, place-based study investigating the everyday lived experience of food insecurity and wider landscape of food aid. In the first section of this chapter, I drew on literature exploring the changing face of welfare in the UK to illustrate the key role within the support sector that food aid now plays, identifying that much of this literature has focused on the role of the food bank, and other sites of food aid are underexplored. In the second section I explored the condition of precarity and the emotional dimension of poverty and food aid use, contextualising the challenges and impact of accessing food aid when experiencing hardship. In the third section I interrogate decision-making and the significance of choice within western consumer society and the implications this holds for those experiencing financial and food insecurity; in doing so, highlighting the lack of research exploring choice within sites of food aid themselves. While in the final section, I focus on urban life and the possibilities wrought from propinquity and 'the encounter' – drawing attention to the way that the encounter can be a useful method for challenging 'normal' practices and behaviour, and identifying power dynamics. Through these sections, I illustrate the complex ways in which food insecurity and food aid can be understood and in doing so highlight the intersections that can be found between work exploring consumption, urban theory, and the lived experience of austerity. In the following chapter, I explore the methodological approach I took in the production of this thesis and reflect on the story of this research.

3. METHODOLOGY

This thesis intends to provide an ethnographic account of food aid and food insecurity from the perspectives of those accessing, and those providing food aid within a bound geographical urban area – East and East-Central Bristol. The stories shared, and arguments built in this thesis are informed by data collected during 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork between September 2017 and August 2018, alongside engagement with other key food aid providers following my 'exit' from the field, and chance encounters with research participants that were made possible by my living in close proximity to the field sites.

In this chapter, I outline the methodological approach taken to collect this data and produce this account. Examining a wider landscape of food aid, this research was conducted using a multi-site ethnographic approach and was situated in two food bank outlets, a community food centre, and a community kitchen. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews (n=35), and a focus group (n=1) were the key methods of data collection informing this thesis.

Crucially, while this chapter addresses the approach, sites, methods, ethics and analysis of this research, it also critically engages with the *experience* of conducting fieldwork, to show how research, "is a *process*, not just a product" (England, 1994, p. 244). Beginning this chapter by arguing for an ethnographic approach to knowledge production, I follow with the story of this thesis.

3.1 KNOWLEDGE AND THE ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD

The overarching aim of this thesis is to examine the everyday lived experience of food aid in East and East-Central Bristol, and in doing so, build an emic account of these spaces, experiences and their meaning for those involved, through ethnography.

In building this account, I take a constructivist approach, understanding and recognising the world, ontologically, to be an "intersubjective creation" (England,

1994, p. 243), in which there is no "absolute 'truth'" (Crang et al., 2007, p. 14) but multiple realities or truths. Epistemologically, I assert that we each mediate the world, constructing, interpreting and reshaping meaning through our acts and experiences, and that to carry out research is to explore a world, "already interpreted by people who are living their lives in it" (England, 1994, p. 251). This means that research is 'in truth' an exploration of the spectrum of 'betweenness' shaped by the actors involved, in which the participants *and* researcher are active in the co-construction of knowledge.

Relating this to identity formation, positionality and how we understand ourselves in the world, I recognise that "personal histories and lived experiences" (England, 1994, p. 248) form our social identities and that these social identit*ies*, or 'narrative identities', shift with time and space, and are relational (Somers, 1994, p. 606). Taking this constructivist approach means that to build an emic account of food aid and food insecurity requires an inductive methodology that is open to how people make sense of their own lives, the world around them, and how they locate themselves, or are located, in these different narratives (Somers, 1994, p. 606). In following this approach, I found that ethnography is the most appropriate methodology for this form of sense-making, because it "engage[s] with, rather than withdraw[s] from this 'real world' messiness", allowing for the space, time, and reflexivity to pursue and produce "*inter-subjective truths*" (Crang & Cook, 2007, p. 14, italics in the original).

To define ethnography, Wacquant (2003, p. 5) provides the following description:

> *"[Ethnography is] social research based on the close-up, on-the-ground observation of people and institutions in real time and space, in which the investigator embeds herself near (or within) the phenomenon so as to detect how and why agents on the scene act, think and feel the way they do."*

As a methodology, ethnography demands and enables an iterative process of questioning, contextualising and pursuing meaning. Which, through 'close-up, on-the-ground' methods, supports the production of emic knowledge (I discuss the value

and limitations of emic research further in section 3.2.3). And while, 'theoretically informed' (Willis & Trondman, 2002, p. 396), the beauty, or strength, of ethnography is "the way in which it deliberately leaves openings for unanticipated discoveries and directions" (Amit, 2000, p.17). As such, it is an open, responsive, yet probing approach to knowledge production that is reflexive and iterative in nature.

Examining the landscape of food aid within and beyond the food bank, the encounters that take place, and how people use and experience these spaces, means that my research focus naturally lends to a multi-sited ethnographic approach. In the words of Marcus (1995, p. 105), multi-sited research is:

> *"designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of location in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites."*

Significantly, the value of conducting multi-sited research became more apparent the longer I was in the field. When I began this research, the posited logic of 'association or connection' was primarily driven by a desire to understand how people 'get by' when experiencing food insecurity. Each food aid provider was open only a few short hours a week, and by conducting research in multiple arenas, I could go to various sites throughout the week to meet potential participants and optimise contact time with them. This meant that, at first, the sites were chosen because they would give me access to people experiencing food insecurity. However, later, as I became immersed in the field, the reflexive and iterative nature of the ethnographic method meant that I was able to perceive nuanced connections and contradictions between these spaces, which meant that I turned to look the sites themselves in more detail, enriching the findings of this thesis.

With this in mind, I need to emphasise that this research takes shape in a different form to that which was anticipated in the beginning, and the knowledge produced in this thesis has a history, or narrative, which may not have been developed in the same way by another researcher. Accordingly, in telling these stories, I highlight the *process* of ethnography, and emphasise the challenges, revelations, and positionalities that create it.

3.2 Recognising field sites, gaining access and shifting focus

'Being there' (Watson, 1999) in the field, listening, observing and responding to the encounters and stories that emerged, was instrumental to the shaping of this thesis. Importantly here, this project started in a different place to where it ended, and the iterative nature of ethnography has been crucial to the research journey – where fieldwork led to a shift in research focus; participant observation informed interviews; interviews informed participant observation; and theory came later, informed by the field. Consequently, it is important to explain the origins of this project, and how decision-making during early stages of fieldwork created the setting for its later manifestation.

3.2.1 Early stages

The methods of data collection, and initial aims of this project, played a crucial role in locating this research. Before I started fieldwork, the aim of this project was to discover what tactics mothers might use to provide food for their families when they face food insecurity. This was informed by research that has illustrated the key role mothers play in food provisioning and sacrifice. In particular, I was interested in agency – how mothers 'get by' when they have limited resources and how their cultural identity formed part of their decision-making over food. Excited by the various methods I could use within the ethnographic approach, I decided that it would be interesting to try to incorporate a creative method of data collection. Merging discourses around food and culture in the context of insecurity, I wanted to explore whether cooking might facilitate elicitation while providing participants 'comfort in distraction' when asked probing questions about sensitive issues. In light of the 'rise of the food bank' I decided that I would use the food bank as a measure of food insecurity, setting out an inclusion criterion for participation which asked for mothers who had either accessed, or considered accessing, a food bank in the last three years, and who took responsibility for sourcing food in their household. I wanted to include research participants who were from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds, understanding this to be a gap in academic knowledge, and so decided to focus my research in areas of the city where poverty levels and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic representation were highest. I used national census Lower

Layer Super Output Areas (LSOA) data to determine the areas of my research, which led me to conduct the ethnography primarily in Easton and Lawrence Hill (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). Sitting next to each other in East-Central Bristol these are both inner-city wards.

Knowing the methodology, methods, location and inclusion criteria for this research, I had to decide on how I would reach participants in a way that enabled me to conduct an ethnographic project involving participant observation. I decided that I would find groups or services that were already engaging with mothers from diverse backgrounds who were low-income and may be vulnerable to experiencing food insecurity, and to try to gain access through these gatekeepers. After an initial internet-based scoping exercise of Easton and Lawrence Hill services, I discovered that there were a vast number of support and community-based projects located in this area of the city, and so narrowed prospective services and groups down to those who were working with food to engage with low-income households. This led me to approach six organisations, including the East Bristol Foodbank, FoodCycle Community Kitchen, and a Family Centre who ran a cooking group that sought to bring women from diverse backgrounds together using food. While these providers eventually allowed me access to use their service as a field site, the following section highlights the negotiation or failure involved in accessing 'the field'.

3.2.2. ACCESS

Of the six food projects that I approached, two did not return my communication (following two emails and a phone call) and others responded with requests for further information. Only the Family Centre welcomed me to their service to discuss the project in more depth in the initial stages.

During the visit it transpired that the food group had not been running for a while, and though the Family Centre were happy for me to conduct research, they wanted me to run and facilitate the cooking group too. Though I wanted to be able to 'give back' to organisations who were supporting my research, I was uncomfortable taking on this role for various reasons. Most notably, I had not yet started my fieldwork and had not seen this group in practice, so did not know whether this would be an

appropriate site for my research long-term, nor did I have the time to commit to recruitment and recipe planning. But I was also uncomfortable because I had no real experience of running such a group in the past, and with very questionable cooking skills (something that the group's members later loved to joke about) I was positive that I was not the right person to facilitate the group. Thankfully, one of their Family Support Workers volunteered to lead with my help and we arranged to begin the group with the start of the school term in September 2017.

With one field site confirmed, I persisted with the food bank – who had emailed asking for more information – and arranged to meet the East Bristol Foodbank manager the following week. We met in St Mark's Church in Easton where one of the food bank outlets operates. It was a fairly busy day, and when I arrived, I informed the volunteer at the 'reception' who I was, and they made me a cup of tea and told me to wait, as the manager was still talking to a food bank client. This gave me the opportunity to scope out the surroundings, and while the food bank was situated in a church, it did not *feel* like a church, but rather like a community hall. When the manager was free, we sat down and discussed my project. Agreeing to let me carry out fieldwork in the food bank, he mentioned that I would need to sign a form to say that I would be accepting of faith-based practices while I researched here and we agreed that I would assume the role of volunteer whilst conducting my research, so that the service users would feel comfortable with my being in the space, and not simply observing them in a moment of vulnerability.

Not all of my attempts to gain access to services were successful, yet this did not mean that they were not valuable learning experiences. For example, when I approached another project, I asked whether I would be able to volunteer with them and conduct research as part of a larger project investigating food bank use and the tactics mothers use to source food. This did not go down well at all. Unbeknownst to me at that early stage of my research, the food bank model is heavily criticised, and the project in question responded to my email simply with a description of how their model was different from a food bank. I followed up this response twice and also tried to phone them, as I found it fascinating that my error in referring to their service as a food bank had evoked such a strong response, however I was unsuccessful in getting any more information from them and had to move on for the time being.

The third site was the FoodCycle Community Kitchen in Barton Hill. Gaining access to FoodCycle was a slightly different experience, because on the ground, it is completely volunteer-led and I had to go through head office, which is based in London, to request research access. This led to a lot of emails back and forth, and I got the impression that they often turn research requests down, as they kept asking me for more information. I finally received confirmation that I could conduct this research in August 2017, but interestingly, there were certain conditions under which I had to conduct the research. I would have to volunteer for them for at least three months, I could not conduct interviews on-site as this would detract from the 'guest experience' (explained in more depth in Chapter 0), and I had to be subtle with how I discussed my research with guests, making sure to be ethically transparent, without making them feel that they were being scrutinised.

While negotiating access with these services often felt like 'striking a bargain' (Sultana, 2007, p. 380), and required a bit of give and take when it came to deciding my role within that space, I was lucky that three of the services were happy for me to start volunteering and researching after my project was approved by the College's Ethics Committee towards the end of September 2017. Furthermore, it was fortuitous that they operated on different days of the week, which meant that I conducted fieldwork on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Importantly, the process of gaining access actually provided opportunities for reflection, and as Cook (2005, p. 172) states, "the reasons given for why a community and/or situation which you want to research is or is not open to you may reveal vital clues to its character". For example, in the case of the service that would not engage with me, the interaction highlighted the importance of language and understanding how certain food aid models are perceived within the wider landscape of food aid.

3.2.3 FEELING UNSETTLED IN MULTI-SITED RESEARCH

During the first three months of my fieldwork, I felt conflicted about the apparent messiness of multi-sited ethnography. I could not easily see the connections between

the field sites that I had hoped would exist, nor were these sites particularly helpful for researching mothers.

The St Mark's food bank was open between 2 and half 4 on a Friday, and after observing that there were not as many women accessing the site as I had hoped, the volunteers pointed out that this could be due to the opening times, as mothers would most likely be doing the school run at this time. To combat this, they suggested that I also come along to the Tudor Road food bank on a Wednesday, which was open between 12 and 2pm, as I would be more likely to talk to mothers. So, from the beginning of November 2017, I started to volunteer in both food bank outlets in the hope of improving contact opportunities.

While I felt happy with my decision to increase my time in the food bank setting, I still felt frustrated as I grappled with the problem of recruitment in the Family Centre and FoodCycle Community Kitchen. Volunteering with FoodCycle for a few weeks, I saw that there were very few women who attended. The majority of people who came along every week were regulars, and so this did not bode well for my recruiting mothers in the near future. However, something in my gut told me that I should carry on as I found the provision model particularly interesting. Partially satisfied with continuing research in this service, the real problem that I felt was unresolved was with the Family Centre. Over the 6-8 weeks that I had been attending the group there had been fewer and fewer people attending, and through conversations with the few who occasionally turned up (sometimes no one showed), it became clear that they did not feel comfortable talking about their experiences of food insecurity and actively avoided the subject when it was raised. Furthermore, the majority of women who attended were from East and North African countries, were mothers, and would largely communicate in Arabic. As I do not speak Arabic, this meant that conversations and jokes would often have to be translated for me, which could become quite jarring for the women attending. Concerned that I would find it difficult to reach women from diverse backgrounds through the food bank alone, I was relieved when I met a woman through this group who ran a different women's group in Barton Hill. She invited me along to see whether this would be a helpful site to recruit women for my research, and I decided that if this new group was useful

then I could end my research in the Family Centre and make my exit from that particular field site – although that was easier said than done.

Following this encounter, I was now attending the Tudor Road food bank on a Wednesday, the Family Centre on a Thursday, the other women's group on a Friday morning, the St Mark's food bank on a Friday afternoon, and the FoodCycle Community Kitchen on a Saturday. Busy, yet enjoying immersing myself in the volunteering ethnography, I continued to attend each of these services for another month, though felt rising discomfort about the shape of the project.

3.2.4 SHIFTING FOCUS AND FINDING THE THIRD SITE

I soon discovered that the decisions I had made regarding field sites had led me to a crossroads. In trying to conduct an ethnography focusing on mothers, employing creative cooking methods, and investigating culture and food, and food insecurity, I had unwittingly pursued two different research projects, or at least that is how it felt. For a variety of reasons, the two women's groups were not useful for engaging with mothers who were experiencing food insecurity, while the community kitchen was not useful for engaging with mothers. Becoming more interested in the sites themselves, as well as the topic of food insecurity, I realised that there was crossover between the community kitchen and the food banks because they were both directly trying to address food insecurity, while there was crossover between the two women's groups who sought to provide informal support and build wellbeing using food as a tool to bring people together. I was torn between two distinct research possibilities, and it was a serendipitous conversation that helped me to make the decision of which to pursue.

On a particularly wet and rainy day a couple of weeks into the new year of 2018, I was volunteering at the FoodCycle Community Kitchen when a woman popped in to ask if she could drop off some flyers for the 'guests'. She introduced herself as a community worker at the Real Economy/Sims Hill Community Food Centre and was clearly familiar with the community kitchen as she was walking in and out of the kitchen to chat to the volunteers and talking to some of the guests about her work.

My interest was piqued when I overheard her talking to a guest about accessing fresh food for free and why it was 'better' than a food bank. Engaging her in conversation, I told her about my research, and asked if I would be able to come along to the community food centre at some point to check it out. She seemed receptive and we exchanged contact information. Discovering that the community food centre was only open on a Thursday, I decided that considering my misgivings with the direction of my research, I would miss a week at the Family Centre in order to find out what the community food centre was all about.

I decided to visit the community food centre in early February 2018. Situated on the 'Feed Bristol' site – a "six-acre wildlife gardening hub" (Avon Wildlife Trust, 2018) on the edge of East Bristol – the community food centre was run through 'Sims Hill Shared Harvest', a Community Supported Agriculture project.

Locking up my bike by the gate I went to join the members of the community food centre sheltered underneath a canopied structure where a number of odd tables and chairs were pushed together to form one big table. Huddling down with a warm cup of tea, I got talking to the six or seven people congregating there. A lot of the conversation was centred around food, but also touched on health issues, alcohol consumption, and diet and lifestyle choices. We were essentially chatting about why people were at the group. After about an hour of chatting, we started laying down plastic sheeting around a polytunnel to protect the crops from weeds. Talking to one of the 'helpers' while we did this, I learned that the intention of the group is to address food insecurity in a holistic way that considers 'vulnerabilities', such as mental and physical health, community and wellbeing. This notion captured my interest because it resonated with the wellbeing focus of the women's groups, yet focused on food insecurity specifically.

While there was no field 'out there' ready to be discovered (Amit, 2000), after my first visit to the community food centre I felt like something clicked into place and with the community food centre's consent to conduct research, decided to invest my research energy in the community food centre, food banks and community kitchen – food aid initiatives that addressed food insecurity as a key priority. As Schrag (1997, p. 2) argues, "all starting points are contingent. One could always choose another

beginning". In shifting my research sites, I also shifted my research focus – to explore the everyday of food aid sites *and* food insecurity. In doing so, I both opened and restricted my recruitment criteria, and now included anyone accessing the food banks, the community kitchen and the community food centre, rather than purely focusing on mothers. Importantly for the discussion here, I constructed 'the field' through the decisions I made along the way, which was enabled by the flexible inductive methodology I had chosen. I was intrigued to understand how people (and who) engaged with these food aid sites, and while I was comfortable with my shift in research focus away from focusing solely on mothers, because it was a decision influenced from 'being there', I found that the difficulty I now faced was one of exiting the field, where obligations and relationships – social contracts - had already been established (something that I discuss further in section 3.5).

3.3 POSITIONALITY, VOLUNTEER ETHNOGRAPHY, AND LIMITATIONS OF EMIC RESEARCH

As ethnographers, we are central to the construction of research and what is discovered, a crucial element of which is shaping 'the field' in which we immerse ourselves, which is why I find it important to explore the earlier foundational stages of this research. The ethnographic field does not simply exist awaiting discovering, but is something that is "laboriously constructed, [and] prised apart from all the other possibilities for contextualisation" (Amit, 2000, p.6). Related to this, Stanley and Wise (1993, p. 157) state that, "there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher", which, as a note on knowledge production, highlights the importance of writing about positionality and context – to be able to take "a position and the right to speak – for oneself and certainly for others" (Pratt, 1992, p. 241). Essentially, to explain who we are as researchers in relation to our research subject, our participants, and the impact that this can have on the knowledge produced.

> *"The world is an intersubjective creation and, as such, we cannot put our commonsense knowledge of social structures to one side."*
> *(England, 1994, p. 243)*

Taking a constructivist approach and pursuing inter-subjective truths, it is necessary to explore my own positionality as I entered the field. Living in the area where I was conducting much of this research – in Easton – it was clear that I had a different experience of living in Bristol from that of service users. Exploring these field sites and discussing the geographical area with service users could sometimes feel like I was "moving in spaces both familiar and strange" (Han, 2010, p. 14) during the fieldwork experience. I found it particularly striking that the same streets and public spaces I visited could *feel* different depending on the time of day or how they were being used. While occupying the same physical space, I lived in a very different social and cultural space in my personal life (Allen & Pryke, 1994), which really threw into question what it meant to be immersed in the field. For by living in Easton I was to some extent already immersed in 'the field', yet this space had become a place of duality that I had to negotiate.

As a white middle-class woman from a financially comfortable background who had never experienced food insecurity, I was aware that my life experiences would mean that I conducted this research with a different positionality to those who accessed the food aid sites as service users. At the time of the fieldwork, I was in my late twenties, did not have any dependents, and was living in a two-income household; and though I had experienced financial insecurity, and had claimed benefits, this had only been for a short period of time in-between jobs and I had not experienced food insecurity as a consequence. Indeed, my life circumstances – certainly my socio-economic status – may have been more comparable to those who were volunteering or working in these sites, than the low-income, precarious and often working-class individuals and households who accessed the food aid sites because of food insecurity.

Taking an ethnographic approach to this research project helped to explore the 'betweenness' of our realities because it enabled me to explore different experiences and discover how people made sense of their own lives, the sites, and to challenge assumptions about food insecurity and food aid which I held before I entered the field. For while I did not have personal experience of food insecurity, I did have ample experience of working and volunteering with charities and organisations addressing related issues of poverty, homelessness and domestic abuse, and was aware that these experiences had shaped my perception of food insecurity politically.

For example, prior to my entering the field I recognise that I held a normative view of the situation – that people should not be so poor that they need to access food aid, and that consequently, these sites should not exist in our society. Acknowledging that I was approaching the research with this viewpoint, I intentionally chose to carry out an ethnographic research project so that I could challenge these assumptions and learn more about the nuances of this phenomenon, using ethnography as a way to address or challenge my position on the subject.

3.3.1 VOLUNTEERING ETHNOGRAPHY, THE LIMITATIONS OF EMIC RESEARCH AND THE ENCOUNTER

As Berreman (1972, p. 138) states, "every ethnographer, when he reaches the field, is faced immediately with accounting for himself before the people he proposed to learn to know". In a very tangible way, for me, this meant assuming the role of a 'volunteer ethnographer' (Garthwaite, 2016b, p.62), which is a term coined by Garthwaite to describe an ethnographer who also volunteers with the group or organisation they wish to research. As I have already mentioned in this chapter, in order to gain access to three of the field sites (the community kitchen, food bank and family centre), I was explicitly asked to assume the role of a volunteer by the organisation. And by assuming a voluntary support role within these services, I was not only 'striking a bargain' (Sultana, 2007) to gain access, but also assuming a role that held meaning to both service users and service providers within those contexts, accounting for myself being in this space on a regular basis. In two of the sites (the family centre and the food bank) this was felt to be necessary ethically, because these spaces required specific reasons for being there, and as neither a parent nor a person experiencing food insecurity, attending as a 'service user' would have felt unethical. I was aware that "researchers must assume social roles that fit into the world they are studying" (Alder & Alder, 1987, p.8) and the role of volunteer ethnographer allowed me to 'be there', in these spaces, without lying about my circumstances, or awkwardly sitting in a corner observing people, imposing myself on the site and creating another variable that would influence participants' behaviour.

By volunteering, I was also able to actively 'give back' and contribute to the services that were enabling me to carry out this fieldwork. It was very apparent from my

initial conversations with service providers that they often had requests from research students and were far more willing to give access to those who participated productively in the running of the project. In this way, assuming the role of volunteer ethnographer also partially challenged the traditional perception of power between a researcher and their research participants, and by volunteering and committing to supporting the running of the project for a longer duration, I was immediately perceived in a different light to other research students who approached these services to carry out shorter-term projects, standalone interviews or surveys, for I was not simply mining for data, but giving my time and energy to support the project too.

However, while there were clear benefits to assuming this role of volunteer ethnographer, in particular with regards to accessing 'the field', there were other power dynamics to consider which had an impact on the research. For example, by taking on this role, I held a position characterised as someone who 'gave' support and did not 'take' food in these settings. This created an additional imbalance of power between myself and a large proportion of my intended research participants – service users – as not only was I already the one asking for them to share their stories and experiences, but I could feasibly be perceived to be in a position to give or withhold food in my role as volunteer.

One way in which this manifested was in recruiting service users for interview, as while I made it clear to service users that I was an independent researcher first and foremost, service users often agreed to take part in an interview in a way that made it clear that they saw it as a way to reciprocate for the food they had received – particularly at the food bank. This unsettled me, as I felt that there was an element of obligation in their participation, even when I explained my independent position. This was not helped by the nature of the food bank as an emergency support, as the people I approached to ask to interview had often used the food bank only once or twice, and so the snapshot engagement we had may not have been sufficient enough to fully convey this separation of roles, which may have led to the feeling of obligation in exchange for the food they had received. I found that while this problem was less commonplace in the community kitchen or the community food centre, where service users regularly attended and were approached after building up

a relationship, they may also have felt a different form of obligation to take part, this time due to our 'friendship' in these spaces. To address this, I reiterated my independent position when we met to interview, and in most cases, these interviews took place outside of the service locations, which further contributed to a physical separation of association to my role as volunteer (I discuss this further in section 3.4.4.2).

To identify and address these power dynamics at play, not only between myself as a researcher, but as a volunteer, I paid particularly close attention to encounters between volunteers, staff and service users in these spaces, as well as encounters with material items in these sites. Like Dawney (2012), I found that some encounters can become moments of interruption, in many ways, visceral reactions, which make us stop and question practices and procedures and their meaning, highlighting the value of using 'the encounter' as a method of revealing structures at play within these spaces. For by focusing on the encounter in this way through my ethnographic approach, it enabled to reflect on positionalities and to develop intersubjective truths, because it examines moments of knowledge production, where realities interact, are constructed and reconstructed.

While I acknowledge and actively investigate these power dynamics in this research, it should be noted that they also highlight the limitations of pursuing an emic account of food insecurity from the position of volunteer ethnographer. For reasons I have outlined above, I did not participate in these spaces as a service user, but as a volunteer. This meant that while I was positioned *close* to service users, my experience in the field was more in line with developing an emic understanding of food aid from the perspective of the service provider. To address this limitation of emic research I designed the research methodology in a way that allowed assumptions to be challenged. For example, I invested in conducting participant observation for at least three months in the food bank and community kitchen (and one month in the community food centre) before approaching service users to participate in an interview, so that understanding gained through observation could be explored and challenged in the interviews. In addition, I offered each of the research participants the opportunity to edit their interview transcriptions before analysing their content, something that I elaborate on in section 3.4.6. While I could

have approached this research using another, perhaps more etic approach, through the use of a questionnaire, standalone interviews or focus groups – even quantitatively analysis of food aid sites, distribution of food and other statistics - I believe that this would have limited the scope of knowledge produced. For example, these methods may have been useful for obtaining insight into how many people use food aid sites, where they're located and perhaps why people use them, but would not have shed sufficient light on what happens in these spaces, the everyday of how these spaces operate, are experienced, and why. By pursuing an emic account of food insecurity and food aid I have been able to look at the micro-level of these food aid sites, the value and contradictions of these sites, and the experiences of those accessing them because of food insecurity.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

When the focus of this ethnography shifted in response to the field that I was in the process of constructing, this also had an impact on the methods of data collection used. This section explores these different methods of data collection and focuses on ethical considerations and moments of reflexivity in research design.

The participant observation which grounds this research was conducted for 11 months in the St Mark's food bank and FoodCycle Community Kitchen; for 9 months in the Tudor Road food bank, and for 4 months in the Real Economy/Sims Hill Community Food Centre. This participant observation, combined with 35 semi-structured interviews – of which 21 were with service users and 14 were with service providers – forms the basis of this thesis, and is complemented by a focus group with food bank volunteers, photo documentation that illustrates the space and design of the food aid services, and discussion on the incorporation of 'doing with' as a method of elicitation.

3.4.1 PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND FIELD NOTES

Before conducting interviews, I started the fieldwork with two months of participant observation in each site. Participant observation can enable ethnographers to see the

"real life contexts" of research participants and "can supply detailed, authentic information unattainable by any other research method" (Li, 2008, p. 101). It forms an essential part of ethnographic practice, which is largely, "watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 2), and lets the researcher inductively experience the field and follow stories that emerge. Participant observation allows the ethnographer the time and opportunity to, at least partially, learn to speak the 'language' of those that they research. In doing so, the tacit knowledge and understandings they accumulate support other aspects of data collection such as focus groups and interviews to prevent misinterpretations that may otherwise have occurred.

Speaking back to positionality, in order to conduct participant observation in the field, I assumed different roles within the services. I volunteered in the food banks, which meant that I would chat to service users but also label tins, pack up food parcels and do a lot of heavy lifting. In the community kitchen I was asked to become a voluntary 'Project Leader' for the hosting team, which meant that I was actively 'hosting' the guests and supervising other volunteers. But in the community food centre, I was a 'helper'. Interestingly, when I first joined, I thought that I had been allowed access as a group participant/researcher, but after a few weeks I heard the Community Worker leading the project referring to me as a 'helper'. This was a bit of a disconcerting revelation as I had definitely not been acting in a way that I considered to be 'helping'. If anything, I had spent the first few weeks being taught how to do things by the other members of the group. However, as this distinction became known to me, I started to notice that I was being asked to do tasks that the others weren't. It was perhaps naïve of me to assume that I would be granted access to conduct research *and* participate in the group, without giving something back beyond the parameters of the group participant dynamic.

Assuming the role of volunteer ethnographer, I was very conscious of the need to be transparent about my role as a researcher, ethically, but also to emphasise my independence as a researcher. Part of this meant that I tried to ensure that service users, staff and volunteers were all clear about what I was doing in that space. I found the most ethical and practical way to tackle this was to provide information

sheets on my research in the food aid sites[9]. However, depending on the site, I approached this in different ways. For example, in the food bank I gave each of the volunteers a copy of my information sheet when I first arrived; and every week I would make sure there were copies of the information sheet on each table in the food bank, to make sure that service users were aware of my presence. In the community kitchen, I followed the same method, although I only positioned information sheets on two key tables – one where service users make their tea and coffee, and the other where they pick up extra 'surplus food'. In addition, each of the Project Leaders were given an information sheet when I first arrived, and new volunteers were informed of my project during the set up before the meal. In the community food centre, because the group was so small, I gave all participants and staff a copy of my information sheet when I first arrived and brought some along each week in case new people joined.

While I may have assumed roles within these sites that 'made sense' ethically and practically, it is important to recognise that my presence would still have made an impact. As England states (1994, p. 85), "the everyday lives of the researched are doubly mediated by our presence and their response to our presence". People would have undoubtedly been influenced by 'observer effects' created through my being in those spaces, in addition to which, it is important to recognise that they would have been further influenced by my position as someone who 'provides' food rather than 'participates' on an equal level. While "relationships of power between researchers and participants influence the way in which knowledge is constructed and what becomes 'known'" (Milligan, 2016, p. 241), there is the additional complexity of holding dual positions of power as a volunteer ethnographer. This is where the practice of reflexivity in ethnographic work is so important. For by recognising positionalities and power inequalities we are able, or at least can attempt, to contextualise our findings. In addition, by conducting research for longer periods of time and assuming a role within the context of the site, the presence of a researcher in the field site would become part of the everyday.

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[9] See Appendix 1 for Information sheet.

While I went to great lengths to ensure people were well-informed of my presence as a researcher, there were also times in the field where I was unable to. This would often occur in the food bank or community kitchen where people who I had not spoken to before would be present. But like Spicker (2011), I believe that covert participant observation should not always be considered unethical, as "many of the objections which are made to covert research are objections to deception rather than covert activity" (p. 119). While some participants in my study may not have always been aware of my position, this identity was not intentionally hidden, and because I have anonymised the identities of service users interviewed and observed in this research, I do not feel that they have been 'deceived'. In truth, participant observation is an excellent method of data collection that enables the ethnographer to get beyond what is "allowable knowledge" (Berreman, 1972, p. 143). To see beyond what people convey in an interview context to observe actions and behaviour, as well as employ "engaged listening" (Forsey, 2010, p. 72). However, I do recognise a capacity for exploitation with participant observation, which I will discuss later with regards to 'rapport'.

Addressing the practicality of translating the participant observation into data, I found that the most effective way to write field notes was to write up in-depth accounts of events immediately after I left the field site. Resonating with Berry (2011), I initially began my fieldwork with the intention of "hypervigilant participant observation", only to realise the impossibility of this practice, soon becoming "engrossed in the flow of ethnographic practices" (p. 171). Conducting a multi-sited ethnography at times felt exhausting, and it was unrealistic to expect that I would have the energy to annotate my entire experience. Though where in-depth accounts were not always possible, I always ensured that I noted down key observations. While it would not have been appropriate to sit in a corner with my notebook, I often used the 'notes' app on my phone in order to record quotes and observations as they happened, so as to avoid solely relying on memory. It was quite common that service users and volunteers alike would use their phones in front of me and people would often assume I was writing a text message and so would not question this behaviour.

Picking up on the issue of memory and subjectivity in writing field notes, Maanan (1988, p. 118) argues that:

> *"the heavy glop of material we refer to as fieldnotes is necessarily incomplete and insufficient. It represents the recorded memory of a study perhaps, but it is only a tiny fraction of the fieldworker's own memory of the research period."*

Considering this statement, it is important to highlight that field notes were used in my research to recall important moments in the field, but also as indicators and references that were triangulated with other forms of data collection, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and photo-documentation.

3.4.2 PHOTO DOCUMENTATION

At various times through the fieldwork experience I would take photos of significant spaces or events to include in my thesis, but also as a visual reminder of the layout of the field sites to aid with writing. When I took photos, for ethical reasons I always ensured that I did not take pictures of people when they were not aware. If people were in the frame, I got verbal consent to use it in my thesis and if I couldn't, I deleted the picture or cropped the photo to make sure their faces were not in the frame.

3.4.3. COOKING AND 'DOING WITH'

When I originally designed this research, I wanted to use cooking as a creative method of data collection, as a means of elicitation and distraction. Having been interviewed myself in the past, I was aware of the discomfort that can arise in sitting opposite an interviewer – for holding direct eye contact and talking about personal thoughts and experiences can make you feel vulnerable and exposed. Considering this experience, I wanted to conduct the interviews around an activity that would provide the interviewee with something to occupy their body, but also a focal distraction for their gaze, and potentially mine. As the research in question focused on food, I thought that cooking could work as an embodied form of data collection. Having familiarised myself with some of the walking interview literature, I was taken by the notion that your surroundings and sensorial experiences can evoke

different connections and responses within the interview itself (Anderson, 2004), and wondered whether I could apply this to cooking.

However, soon after I entered the field I realised it was not a viable data collection method when working with people who experience food insecurity, at least not as an alternative to conventional semi-structured interviews. Before I started fieldwork, I had thought it would be possible to conduct these cooking interviews in people's homes, but to avoid unnecessarily exhausting participants resources it would have required my purchasing the food with which to cook and contributing money towards gas and electric – which would likely have elicited feelings of discomfort, shame and embarrassment, for it would have reaffirmed my role as 'giver' and their position as 'receiver'. Indeed, it also felt out of step with the 'everyday' that I hoped to elicit through my fieldwork. Consequently, for me, cooking interviews became an unnecessarily complicated, and potentially unethical approach to pursue in this context.

Despite this data collection 'failure', I found that participating in the field and taking part in activities with participants elicited a similar form of 'engaged distraction' – particularly in the community kitchen and community food centre. Indeed, 'doing with' became an important approach to this research, by which I mean, being there alongside participants, talking and engaging in the same activities. A focused form of participant observation, whereby I would not only be participating 'in the field', but in the same activity one-to-one with a participant. 'Doing' activities revolved around prepping food, gardening and washing up at the community food centre, drinking tea or rummaging through the 'help yourself' boxes with clients at the food bank, and eating food with guests at the community kitchen.

3.4.4 SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Though I decided against cooking interviews, this thesis is informed by 35 semi-structured interviews – 21 of which were with people experiencing food insecurity

and accessing the food aid sites[10], and 14 of which were with food aid providers[11]. As Becker & Geer (1957, p. 28) argue, interviewing alongside participant observation, "can improve its accuracy by taking account of suggestions made from the perspective of the participant observer". This certainly resonates with my approach, as in general, I tried to conduct participant observation for at least two months in each field site before I started to recruit service users for interviews. There were some exceptions, but I felt that this was a necessary approach because it would enable me to gain a level of knowledge and understanding needed to conduct a probing, yet sensitive interview. The result of this approach meant that no two interview schedules were the same. While they shared core questions, they were shaped to the individuals I interviewed.

3.4.4.1 RECRUITMENT

In the food banks, I started to recruit participants for interview after about three months of participant observation. Over a period of three to four months, the vast majority of service users I encountered were asked if they would like to take part in my research – all except those who had a limited understanding of English, or who appeared to have mental health issues that would affect their capacity to give informed consent. Positioning information sheets on the tables was a useful recruitment technique, as it gave people a clear indication of what I was doing, and meant that I could leave them to read about the research while they waited for their food parcel – which gave them time to make an informed decision. During this period, I recruited seven people to take part in my research. While this did not *feel* like many in comparison to the vast number of people using the service, I found that there were shared issues and challenges faced by these service users. I recruited a further two individuals for interview during the following four months of fieldwork, bringing the total food bank interviews to nine. These two individuals were recruited because their experiences of food insecurity were notably different from the first seven interviewees. In addition to service-user interviews I also conducted interviews with three staff members and conducted a focus group with volunteers.

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[10] See Appendix 3 for example of service user interview schedule.
[11] See Appendix 4 for example of food aid provider interview schedule.

In the community kitchen, I conducted participant observation for five months before I recruited people for interviews. Unlike those who attended the food bank, the majority of people attending the meal were regulars and I wanted to build relationships and trust with participants before I conducted interviews, and to gauge how people used the service (elicited through informal conversations while eating together). I interviewed five people in total and by specifically targeting participants based on my observations, I was able to recruit people whose experiences of food insecurity and food aid use were varied. I conducted a further three interviews with staff/volunteers – a Hosting Project Leader, a Cooking Project Leader and the Regional Manager for the South West of England.

The community food centre comprised of a small group of people who regularly attended (5 people) and on a weekly basis there could be between 3 and 8 people taking part in the group. I asked all of the regular participants if they would take part in an interview except one group member who I was advised against by the Community Worker leading the group, because they had severe anxiety. And I asked two people who came for a short period of time. In total, I conducted five interviews with participants from the community food centre, four of whom were regular group members and one who attended only twice. In addition to service-user interviews I also interviewed the Real Economy director who initiated the project, and the two Community Workers who ran the group during this time.

I did not use monetary incentives to recruit participants, but in the early stages of fieldwork, the food bank manager offered to give people a free food bank parcel if they took part in my research. While I understood this offer was to help with recruitment, it made me feel uncomfortable and I declined the offer. I did not want to further complicate my already dual identity by exchanging food bank food as I was trying to emphasise my independence as a researcher – nor, on a more personal level, did I want to be seen to condone this form of provision.

I also conducted interviews with managerial staff from three other food aid services that participants discussed, two participants who attended the food bank's 'Eat Well Spend Less' (EWSL) cooking course, and the Chair of Trustees from a local mosque

located opposite the St Mark's food bank. Aside from the two participants of the EWSL course, these interviews were conducted after I finished data collection in the three food aid sites, and were pursued in order to develop a broader understanding of the landscape of food aid in the area.

3.4.4.2 LOCATION

The interview allows for the telling "of a particular story…which would not necessarily be replicated at another time, or with another interviewer, or in another geographical space" (Cloke et al., 2000, p. 137). As such, it is important to consider the contexts in which research takes place, and how this can "provoke memories and insights into the world views and self-conceptions of differently positioned people" (Crang & Cook., 2007, p. 10). While we often pay attention to positionality and power within an interview and the impact of space 'in the field', it is just as important to consider how the location in which an interview is conducted may impact on the knowledge produced, and how this can expand our sense of the field site. For example, in this study, service users would often choose to conduct interviews in public spaces within their neighbourhoods and ascribe meaning to the spaces during their interviews. Though if they had young children, they would prefer to conduct the interviews at home. This meant that I gained further insight into their day-to-day 'lifeworlds' (Berry, 2011) and expanded my references to and knowledge of 'the field'.

I carried out the 35 semi-structured interviews in various locations in different neighbourhoods across Bristol, including participants' homes (7), my home (2), field sites (8), cafés (15) and bars (2), as well as one telephone interview. Recognising that the interview method is an imbalanced exchange, I tried to promote a more equitable relationship by asking the interviewee to choose the location of the interview, hoping that this would encourage the participant to feel safe in that space. This approach also meant that they could choose a space that was convenient for them, at a time that would not interfere with their daily routines. These considerations of power and choice were particularly important with regards to service users because of the

vulnerabilities associated with food insecurity, and the heightened power imbalances that were already at play due to my role as a volunteer ethnographer.

By asking participants to choose the location of the interview, I also sought to create a level of independence between my role as a researcher and my role as volunteer within the services. This was particularly important when interviewing service users, many of whom were regularly accessing food aid, and reported strong feelings of gratitude and indebtedness to the services – in particular to the food bank. If I were to be perceived as a representative of that provider, then this might influence how they talked to me about the services, and less inclined to reveal anything negative that they experienced while engaging with that service. By meeting off-site, I hoped to temper this association (to varying degrees of success, as you can see from Sue's conflation of 'you' and 'food bank' in the opening extract).

I found that the location directly influenced how freely the participant felt that they could disclose information. For example, in public spaces there were moments where participants became more aware of those around them, either lowering their voices, or in the case of one participant, insisting we move – twice – to different tables in the café to avoid being overheard. These moments highlighted the sensitivity of the interview content, making visible the vulnerability that the participant felt. In each of these circumstances I asked if participants would like to stop the interview, or relocate, but in all situations the participant wanted to continue with the interview. This was not an issue for those service users who were interviewed at home – interviewees talked freely and sometimes at great length. However, at-home interviews create different issues, which can relate to control. I sometimes found it difficult to negotiate an exit from the interview, or to keep the interviewee on track, particularly in two service-user interviews where the women had mental health issues. Feelings of entrapment within interviews, while rare, provided an interesting moment of reflexivity for me, because it showed me that while I felt uncomfortable, I was still the one with the power to leave that discomfort behind, highlighting the difference in our circumstances. This left me feeling unsettled, wondering what I may have unintentionally brought to the surface for that individual for the sake of my

research. To preempt such incidents, I always went through the consent form[12] at the beginning of each interview, making sure that participants knew they did not have to answer each question, and that they could stop at any time – or ask me to leave. I would remind them of this at times during interviews when appropriate, however at no point did interviewees request the interview to be stopped or for me to leave.

It is important to note that safeguarding does not just apply to the research participant, and these moments of discomfort highlight the significance of safeguarding for personal safety. While at no point did I feel at risk while conducting the interviews, to ensure my safety, I informed my partner of the location of the interview, what time I would be meeting the participant, and how long I estimated I would be there for; texting him after I left each interview. If I took longer than expected he would then contact me. This was particularly important when carrying out interviews in non-public spaces, such as in the participants' homes. Also, I feel it important to point out that I only conducted interviews with female service users in their homes. While the opportunity did not present itself during my fieldwork, I think that I would have been less willing to do at-home interviews with men.

When interviews took place in a café or bar, I paid for the tea, coffee, alcohol or food that was consumed. It made me feel better about the encounter, to be able to 'give back' to the research participant who was doing me a favour, however I was also conscious of the possibility that this exchange might be interpreted by the participant as a form of charity, particularly considering the interview content. In fact, two male service users refused to let me buy them a drink, and later said that they felt uncomfortable about it. These encounters, which happened early on in my fieldwork meant that I changed my approach. Instead of simply offering, I made sure to tell participants that I was paying for the food and drink from a university research grant and that it was not my own money I was spending. This had a positive impact, as it transformed the provider into a disembodied institution rather than the interviewer, which meant that interviewees were being offered something they were entitled to, rather than a gift. Interestingly, when I conducted at-home interviews, I was unable to offer anything in exchange for the participants' stories, and was actually hosted

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[12] See Appendix 2 for sample consent form.

upon instead, offered tea or coffee, and sometimes food. Which made the encounter feel more like a 'one-sided contract' (Cloke et al., 2000, p. 140) than those where I was able to exchange their time and experience with food or a pint.

3.4.5 FOCUS GROUPS

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I conducted a focus group with volunteers from one of the food banks[13]. Unlike the other services, this food bank had a group of long-serving volunteers who had been there week-in week-out for many years. And while appearing as a somewhat homogenous group in which the majority were white British and retired, over the months I had witnessed minor disagreements about how they conducted themselves in the space and wanted to elicit their experiences and opinions about the food bank in a discussion that would, "generate rich data as respondents rise to challenges and defend views" (Dobson, 2004, p. 284). Having worked alongside the volunteers for a number of months when I conducted the focus group, I found it easy to recruit participants. For I had not only built-up trust over the months working alongside them, but I arranged the focus group to take place over the lunch break before the food bank opened, when I knew that the volunteers would already be on site.

Eight volunteers took part in the focus group. Taking place in the main hall of the food bank, I arranged the tables and chairs to form a circle where the participants could all see each other. In preparation for the focus group, I had distributed information sheets to each of them the week before, but as I had been in the field for almost a year at this point, they were familiar with my research. Before we started, I made sure that each participant signed a consent form and understood that they did not have to answer questions they were not comfortable with or could opt out at any time. Most importantly, I reminded them that while the information I received would be confidential, as third parties, they would also need to agree to confidentiality of information shared in this space, and that they should only share information they were comfortable for others to know. As a semi-structured approach to data collection, I had a set of questions, but allowed the conversation to develop through

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[13] See Appendix 5 for focus group interview schedule.

the topics, prompting with questions where appropriate, but listening and observing as participants responded to one another, following the discussion. I used my phone to record the discussion and took notes on body language and reactions where possible, however, this was more difficult to undertake at the same time, as I was the only person facilitating the focus group.

While at the time I did not feel that I needed to conduct more than one focus group, if I were to have the opportunity again, I would also conduct a focus group with those running the community kitchen and those running the community food centre, as I found that the information discussed and shared provided a useful insight into how certain service processes were interpreted differently, but also how consensus was formed.

3.4.6 REPRESENTATION

Recognising that "the knowledge of the person being researched was greater than mine as the researcher" (England, 1994, p. 243), I attempted to draw the participants back into the research after they had taken part in an interview or in the focus group. In order to do this, I asked each participant to review the transcription of their interview, to clarify any points they felt they were not happy with, and to retract any information they did not feel comfortable sharing. This method of reviewing was also an attempt to give agency back to the research participants. Some participants did not want a transcript of their interview, while many of those who did want a copy did not want to make any amendments. However, when one participant removed a long and interesting passage about their childhood experiences, I recognised the value in giving participants the opportunity to retract this information, as it built trust between us and made for a more ethically robust study – even if at the time I felt that it was a shame to lose that data. While all service users were anonymised in this research, I asked service providers to waive their right to anonymity as I also wanted to be able to identify the food projects. As such, the opportunity to review their submission to this thesis was a very important step for them. Many told me that they rarely got the opportunity to annotate interviews they had given but appreciated the

opportunity, and aside from minor editing of names and references, the transcriptions remained unchanged.

3.5 Doing rapport and 'exiting' the field

Building rapport with your research group is an essential component of ethnographic practice, helping to build trust and gain insight into the lives and views of research participants. But as Stacey (1988) states, "fieldwork research [also] offers particular research subjects practical and emotional support and a form of loving attention, of comparatively non-judgemental acceptance, that they come to value deeply" (p. 26). In a society where many of the participants felt left behind or overlooked by government, a food aid volunteer/researcher investigating the lived experience of food insecurity under austerity was afforded confidences that may not have been given otherwise. But while research participants were aware of my role as a researcher, I was also acutely conscious of the power imbalance implicit in 'doing rapport' (Duncombe et al., 2002) as a way of eliciting data. Because as Amit (2000, p.3) states, "however sincere and nuanced the attachment they express, the ethnographic fieldworkers are still also exploiting this intimacy as an investigative tool".

When I 'finished' my fieldwork, I did not find it easy to exit the field. Though I officially ended my fieldwork in August 2018, I continued to have contact with the field sites afterwards and went on to volunteer with the community kitchen once a month for a couple of years – something that was influenced by the rapport that I had built with the service users, more than an affinity with the project. I recognised that I did not *need* to continue volunteering in the services for research reasons, as I had ample data to work with, but I wanted to continue because it had become part of my everyday life and, living within the area I researched, I had formed a new relationship within my own geographical community. I did not want to be a 'hit and run' researcher (Narayan, 1993, p. 677) and, living within the area where I conducted the majority of my research, felt sad to lose that sense of community that comes from belonging to a group and from 'giving back' to your community by volunteering. In a way it was simply too easy to carry on volunteering. Integral to this sense of

community were the relationships that I built through my fieldwork. These were contextual friendships that were built around place-specific contact and if I left the field, then it felt like I would have to leave these friendships too. I also enjoyed being in those spaces, so much so that I even continued to attend the women's group in Barton Hill until the end of summer term 2018, despite ending my data collection with them at the beginning of the year. I found that exiting the field became easier when I started a DTP Secondment with the Department for Work and Pensions in October 2018, as I was now unable to attend any field sites that operated on weekdays. This forced me to excuse myself from the sites, because I was unable to attend due to my new obligations, giving me the distance and strength to move on to the next stage of my research in January 2019, once I finished the secondment.

3.6 ANALYSIS

I transcribed the focus group and the interviews myself, using a foot pedal and ExpressScribe software for efficiency. Duncombe et al. (2002) emphasise the importance of transcribing your own interviews to avoid an inevitable "loss or distortion when someone else attempt[s] to analyse data abstracted from the emotional context of the rapport through which it was generated" (p. 16). Indeed, the transcription formed a crucial part of the analysis process as it kept the fieldwork fresh in my mind, and as I worked through the transcription, I would make notes on emerging themes and connections that I may otherwise have missed.

All personal information on research participants was stored securely. In order to ensure the confidentiality and security of the information I obtained through field notes, interviews and focus groups, I stored paper evidence in a locked filing cabinet, and interview recordings and transcriptions in a password-protected file on my laptop. To further protect the identities of those involved in my research, I assigned each service user a pseudonym and changed identifiable information in order to anonymise their identities in my research. This step was waived for food aid providers, who confirmed they could be identified in the research. Once I have completed the thesis, I will destroy the recorded audio and will destroy all data collected after 10 years.

In order to develop an 'intersubjective truth' (Crang & Cook, 2007) of food aid and food insecurity in East Bristol, I used a combination of NVivo and Excel to analyse the data and themes developed iteratively. Starting in NVivo, I separated the data into three distinct groups – service-user interviews, service-provider interviews (including the focus group), and field-note observations. I coded each group separately in its own NVivo 'project' in order to view differences between nodes. Once I had completed the first stage of coding in NVivo, I exported each set of nodes into separate Excel spreadsheets and proceeded to review each set of nodes condensing them down from approximately 300 in each dataset, to approximately 80 sub-themes, finally reviewing the data for a third time and settling on between 15–20 themes per dataset. Themes which have formed the foundation of this thesis.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the methodology used in this thesis to produce an emic account of food aid and food insecurity in East Bristol. By reflecting on the ethnographic journey and decision-making I have sought to emphasise the *experience* of the research process, convey the inductive nature of ethnography, and how I came to construct the field. Through this I have outlined the ethical considerations and processes, positionality and reflexivity within the ethnography, and the trouble with 'doing rapport' (Duncombe et al., 2002). In doing so I have offered a comprehensive argument for the methodological approaches used to inform this thesis and introduced the sites of this research. The following chapters turn to the field and, addressing the research questions outlined in the introduction, explore the everyday of food aid and food insecurity in East Bristol. I begin with the journey into precarity through the lived experience of three individuals – Leanne, Ian and George.

4. THE SYSTEM IS BROKEN

After only a short time 'in the field' I became aware that people from across the three sites were telling me similar stories about their reasons for accessing food aid; and though every person's circumstances were different, they shared narratives of precarity that were firmly rooted in financial hardship. Tracing participants' journeys into these spaces, I found that their experiences of food insecurity were largely produced and maintained by socio-economic structures impacting on economic security – specifically income level and income security in relation to the cost of living (Lambie-Mumford, 2017, p. 18) – which interacted with other factors such as housing circumstances, health, disability, and caring responsibilities. For many, income sources were contingent on welfare benefits that were subject to high conditionality, reductions, caps or freezes; and/or through low-paid temporary, zero-hour, or 'gig economy' type employment. Such restricted and insecure income sources, which were sometimes non-existent due to welfare sanctions or delays, coupled by the rising cost of living, left them unable to afford food, as well as other basic everyday essentials such as rent, bills and transport.

Focusing on three participants, whose stories are not dissimilar to the others I interviewed, this chapter considers the interaction of welfare policies and health, housing, and care during times of austerity, in order to illustrate how the prevalence of food insecurity and need for food aid is connected to everyday encounters with welfare. By examining the gaps between policy and experience, this chapter shows how participants share feelings of frustration that are fuelled by a lack of agency (Standing, 2011). There is a disconnect between government neoliberal understandings of poverty and the lived experience. Caught and held down by policies that are meant to support them, participants feel let down by the system, unsupported, restricted or trapped in a state of precarity, and often position the government as a hostile authority responsible for their current circumstances – the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in particular. In response to these frustrations, much of this chapter focuses on the everyday impact of government welfare policy, exploring its interaction with food insecurity through the lives of three individuals – Leanne, Ian and George.

4.1 LEANNE

On a cold day, early in December, I conducted an interview at the home of a mother of three, Leanne (early 30s), who had been using the foodbank regularly for about a month. Sitting in the front room, the one room in the house with lights and heating on during the day – "*to save money*" – Leanne talks quickly and directly, but in-depth, about her recent experiences of food insecurity.

Explaining how she came to use the food bank, Leanne tells me that six months ago she, her ex-partner and children were evicted from the property they were living in and were placed in emergency accommodation by the Local Authority. The emergency accommodation, while only a temporary placement, did not have adequate kitchen facilities, and was situated far from the low-budget supermarkets where she would ordinarily shop.

> "*We was living off fast food because you didn't have a fridge or a freezer - everything was in storage so it was easier just to go and get a takeaway, and before you know it, you're spending hundreds and hundreds of pounds on takeaway. Or, you're not close enough, so your closest shop is Coop or Tesco, so you're paying extra on prices, and until you're in that situation people don't understand how bad it catches up on you. Before that, I was fine.*"

Without a fridge or freezer and access to her cooking equipment, Leanne was unable to store and cook fresh food at home and quickly built up debt purchasing expensive ready meals and fast food, which added to debt they had already accrued. As she explains, these were decisions driven by circumstance, for ordinarily she would not waste money on takeaways, telling me that, "*what I could spend on a takeaway, I could feed my kids for two or three nights*".

Eventually they moved into the temporary accommodation she currently lives in, but she and her partner broke up not long after, and he left her with the children and the debt.

> *"Their dad walked out on me 12 weeks ago and left me with a load of debt, which I'm still trying to pull myself back out of... But we're getting there, we're getting there...next couple of months we'll be alright, but you know it's just the joys of splitting up from a relationship I suppose - they can just walk away and we're left to pick the pieces up, which I'll do."*

As a "*single mum on benefits*" raising three small children, Leanne urgently needed to pay bills and buy food, and turned to the Local Authority to get an emergency payment through the Local Crisis Prevention Fund. This request was declined, and she was instead offered a referral to the local foodbank.

> *"All their services are crap. You ask them for anything, they tell you no. What's the point? I asked for an emergency payment from the council and they said they couldn't give it, but they can give me a foodbank voucher!"*

Frustrated by the lack of monetary support from statutory services, Leanne still needed help and so accessed the food bank. Reflecting on this, she tells me that it has been useful over the past few weeks and is helping her to save money on food and get out of debt, though she makes it clear that she does not 'rely' on the food bank, or on anyone else to get by. She is now hopeful that the crisis period is behind her, and that she won't need to use the food bank much in the future, if at all.

> *"I've used it quite a lot at the moment, in all fairness. But I shouldn't have to go now - I've sort of budgeted my money. So, we're getting somewhere now…I wouldn't say I rely on it, but it does help when I need it."*

While debt and a relationship breakdown were the catalysts for visiting the food bank, Leanne reflects on the welfare system and her everyday life, telling me that she generally doesn't "*do much*" because she doesn't have money, and certainly doesn't have any savings.

> *"I don't do much. I stay in, I don't really go out, don't really socialise – obviously, cause I haven't got a lot of money."*

Pointing attention to how, in such circumstances, welfare policies – in particular, child-related policies – can act as structural barriers to financial and food security, which mean that she continues to live in a state of precarity that leaves her vulnerable. As a mother of three, Leanne is subject to the two-child limit on child tax credits. A policy that has meant that she is not eligible for welfare support for her baby, who was born after the policy was implemented in April 2017. Compounded by the benefit freeze implemented in April 2016, which froze the rates of a number of welfare benefits[14], the payments she currently receives from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have not increased in line with inflation since 2016/17, so in real terms, Leanne has significantly less money to support her children than she did previously.

> *"Everything revolves around the fact that they've put the cost of living up, but they keep your money the same. So, everything is more and more and more, but the social don't want to pay you no more money. The social tell me that I can live off £74 a week [pause]. No, I can't live off £74 a week. I don't get no money for her [third child], so they – I didn't know I was pregnant with her. I didn't have my children to have money! I didn't know I was going to be in this position, you know? ...I think the whole system is absolutely crap. That's my view."*

Here Leanne's experience highlights a frustration with discourse around welfare, because she "*didn't have…children to have money*" and feels penalised for her decision-making. While feeding her baby, Leanne goes on to talk about her decision to be a stay-at-home mum and how childcare policies financially restrict her capacity to go back to work.

> *"I can go back to work fine! But all my money that I would earn would go into putting her [indicates baby] into childcare. My money would be gone. What's the point in going back to work…for someone to look after my baby? I don't get that…I've been to the Jobcentre three times, and I've told them every time, if you can find someone to have my baby free of charge for me, I will go back*

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[14] Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Child Benefit, and some forms of Housing Benefit and Universal Credit

to work quite happily. I would do all the hours under the sun. But why am I going to go to work for you lot to take it all and me be in the same situation as I am now? If not worse off! So, I'm going to work for someone to look after my baby, when I can be at home looking after my baby!?"

In England, the government subsidises 15 hours of childcare for children when they are 3 years old, and at 2 years if the parent(s) meet certain low-income criteria. While Leanne would be eligible under such criteria, her youngest child is not yet 1, so she would still have to source childcare independently and pay for this herself to be able to work. As Leanne explains, working is something people "*should be doing*", but if she worked, she would quite likely be "*worse off*" than she is in her current situation because of the cost of childcare, where any additional support from welfare benefits would not be sufficient to counterbalance the outgoing costs. Relaying the experience of a friend of hers who does work and experiences in-work poverty as a consequence of low-paid employment, she emphasises the limitations to seeing employment as the answer to poverty – which at the time, was promoted by government through the slogan 'making work pay'[15].

"I've got a mate and she goes to work - all my mates go to work - and because they're £10 a month over what they say they can earn to help them with benefits, they [the DWP] don't pay nothing. So now they're skint, they're struggling, because they go to work and earn a living…"

Stating that the system is "*wrong*" and "*crap*", Leanne withdraws politically as she does not believe that any party is speaking on her behalf. She talks about how all political parties sound the same, and promise but never deliver:

"That's why I don't vote. I don't listen to anything the government have got to say because it's because of them that we are the way we are at the moment. I don't think any of them can do better than the next one – seriously. I think they promise, promise, promise, and they just break their promises. It comes on the telly and I just turn it over because I think it's crap."

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[15] A political slogan used by the Conservative Liberal Democrat Government to promote welfare reform.

While she asserts that the current government administration has created this crisis, she does not believe that other parties will change this, which has left her disillusioned with the voting system and has led to her 'opting out' of voting. Deciding not to vote, Leanne reveals a frustration, or disgust in the political process that is often shared by the most marginalised in society (Patrick, 2017a; Standing, 2011). Along with problematically low rates of voter turnout, there is an ever-increasing problem of representation in those who *do* turnout to vote. In the 1987 general election, the turnout rate for the lowest income group was only 4% lower than the wealthiest group, yet in the 2010 election, the difference had grown to 23% (Flinders, 2014). With growing discontent in the political system, research on the impact of welfare reform in Leeds found that people often do not vote because they feel that they are not represented in government, and that opting out is a politically motivated expression of disgust, not apathy (Patrick, 2017a). However, by opting out, underrepresentation is further embedded when politicians focus their messages and policies on those groups in society who do vote. Remarking on this, Flinders (2014) states that by opting out, the poorest in society risk diminishing their representation even further. People feel that they do not have political agency, as the political parties do not represent their interests; yet by opting out, they also risk disempowering themselves further.

4.2 Ian

In mid-May I arranged to interview Ian (late 40s), a member of the community food centre, in a café near his home. Sitting upstairs in a quiet corner, he tells me about his health issues and experiences of living on benefits, explaining how debt and austerity policies such as the bedroom tax and the benefit freeze directly impact on his use of food aid due to intensifying existing financial hardship.

A "*five-time graduate*", Ian is a well-educated and articulate middle-aged man, who has a long history of mental and physical health issues. Connecting his current financial and food insecurity to his experience as a PhD student, Ian tells me that after suffering a number of health and personal crises while studying – leading him to suspend his studies twice – he was not allowed an extension to complete his PhD

and was instead "*thrown out*" of university. This triggered a suicide attempt that left him in a coma in which he lost 60% of his lung function through pneumonia, a health condition which among other illnesses such as diabetes, still affects his day-to-day life. Paid only a small stipend during his PhD, Ian tells me that he accrued debt during his studies that he had expected to be able to pay off once he was in paid employment. However, because of his health conditions, he has not been able to work.

> *"I've had to default on my debt as a consequence of the failure of my PhD…that left me in an inability to work to repay it. Please write about that."*

It is because of these serious health conditions that the DWP determined he be placed in the Employment Support Allowance (ESA) 'support group'.

> *"I'm in the group who are deemed not capable of working and are supposedly not put under pressure of work-related activity, which I'm incredibly grateful. Because I am literally the only person I know in that group, I don't know anyone else who's got that status."*

Though Ian is grateful that he is not expected to undertake 'work-related activity', he tells me that he feels highly stressed by the amount of debt that he owes to his credit card company and to his bank because of his overdraft. He explains that the income he has from disability-related benefits is not sufficient to pay off his debt, pay for his bills and keep food on the table – let alone do anything else – leaving him feeling trapped with this debt.

One of the reasons for Ian's current financial hardship is due to the implementation of the 'removal of the spare room subsidy' in 2013. Otherwise known as the 'bedroom tax', this is a policy that reduces the housing element of welfare income for those who the government deem live in a social property 'too large for their needs' (Moffat et al., 2015). Ian lives alone in a two-bedroom council house in an area of town that he has lived in for more or less his entire life. He has a strained

relationship with his family, but sometimes has a friend to stay and help take care of him when he has bouts of poor health that leave him bedridden. Unfortunately, because this friend is not a formal carer who stays with him on a regular basis, Ian is subject to the bedroom tax.

> *"You know, that [second bedroom] was really recommended [by the housing officer]…so that I can have [my friend] to stay when things are bad, and I couldn't get out of bed for three days. So, [my friend] came from London to stay with me. That's exactly what the second bedroom is there for. You know?"*

Having lived in his property for over ten years, the bedroom tax was not a consideration when initially bidding[16], and his health conditions now mean that Ian does not want to move to a smaller property, because he also suffers from agoraphobia and does not deal well with change.

Unable to work, welfare benefits are Ian's only source of income. Consequently, the bedroom tax greatly impacts on his ability to budget and get by on a day-to-day basis.

> *"I'm in arrears with my rent at the moment…because I occupy the property primarily on my own, I'm a victim of the bedroom tax, so I have to pay about 20 quid a week towards my rent which is just under a hundred a week - and that can only come from benefit. It's my only income. So, it means I'm effectively a hundred quid short of what I would otherwise be – every month. And when your income to begin with is less than 10 grand a year and every penny is going towards either repaying my graduate debt, reducing the size of my overdraft or just keeping food on the table and some of the bills paid, it's not easy."*

Less visible perhaps, but no less *felt*, is the impact of the benefit freeze and inflation on his everyday life; as Ian tells me, disability-related benefits have reduced in real terms, particularly over the last two years since the introduction of the benefit freeze.

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[16] Many Councils, like Bristol, operate a 'choice-based lettings' approach to allocating social tenancies whereby applicants bid on properties they are eligible for and properties are then allocated to those in highest priority to be rehoused (see reference 20 for list of priority need).

"...pensions go up every year with inflation, disability benefit and ESA and other benefits don't. So, the rate of inflation, food inflation particularly, went up in the last year since Brexit, and the decrease in income in real terms...has been horrific. It's been very noticeable that food groups that I used to be able to buy, I can't buy anymore."

As an avid cook, Ian spends his money on second-hand cookbooks when he has the opportunity, but finds that more often than not, he turns to low-budget recipe books such as 'cooking on a bootstrap' by Jack Monroe. As a self-described 'foodie' he relays how his financial circumstances affect his ability to appreciate what Bristol has to offer in many ways, as he is unable to afford to eat out at the restaurants Bristol is famous for. Juggling debt with the rising cost of living, the benefit freeze and the bedroom tax reduction at play, Ian frequently runs out of money before his next welfare payment is due, finding the experience stressful and anxiety inducing, as it also impacts on his ability to manage his diabetes effectively.

The impact of this financial struggle is felt deeply, and not just made visible by what food he is able to purchase. It affects his capacity to participate in social practices, such as friends' birthday celebrations, which contribute further to his existing mental health issues.

"Emotionally it's very difficult. I do end up sometimes crying myself to sleep because of being unable to do things… you feel excluded by virtue of cost – and you are. There's no way of denying that, you are restricted in what you can do. So, emotionally yeah, that's not a positive experience."

This form of exclusion is exceptionally difficult for Ian to adjust to because he has in the past been able to afford to eat well and fully participate in such events, and with the completion of his PhD, had anticipated that he would once again partake in this lifestyle. However, held in a state of precarity by his poor health, debt and reducing income levels from benefits, he does not see a time in which he will be able to experience this again.

Ian sought help for his debt problem through an advice service and, identifying that he could reduce his spending on food, was referred to the community food centre who help him to reduce his food budget by providing him with a bag of fresh vegetables every week. He has regularly participated in the community food centre since it opened a year and a half ago, and this, along with other free 'food sharing' projects, have helped him to reduce his outgoings on food. However, while Ian tells me that these food sources have helped, they do not cover him entirely and he still has to regularly skip meals because of financial reasons. Indicating that while the food aid helps him to get by, it does not impact on the root causes of his food insecurity – which are holding him in a state of precarity.

4.3 GEORGE

George (late 30s) is a regular 'guest' at the community kitchen. Having spoken to him informally on a number of occasions, we finally manage to arrange an interview towards the end of my fieldwork and meet at a local café in mid-June. It's a warm day and we sit outside drinking coffee while he tells me about his experiences of navigating the welfare system, supported housing and using 'free food places' (Haddow, 2021) like the community kitchen[17]. Places that provide free meals to eat on-site.

Having first read about the community kitchen on a flyer put up in a local night shelter, George has been coming to the meal for "*about a year and a half now*", and always sits with the same group of men at the same table towards the back of the room. He tells me that he knows most of them from a drop-in centre designed primarily for people who are homeless or vulnerably housed, and that he sources food from similar free food places "*about 90% of the time",* reasons for which are interconnected, as he tells me it is partly financially driven, partly due to his housing circumstances and partly because of his mental health.

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[17] See Appendix 6 for examples of other food aid sites in the area, including similar 'free food places'.

At the time of our interview, George lived in low-level supported accommodation and was unemployed. Explaining that his money "*goes fairly quickly at the moment*" because he's living on benefits, George tells me that he is currently in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), though has recently applied to transfer over to Employment Support Allowance (ESA) because of his mental health. Though he has experienced poor mental health issues throughout his life, George tells me that at the moment he is looking for work but does not feel that he *could* work if he were to find a job, and had recently experienced a three-month sanction for not fulfilling the conditionality attached to JSA. He feels that moving to ESA would help to "*take the pressure off*" from the Jobcentre.

> "*[I'm] just feeling a bit low really generally. Just sort of depression, anxiety as well. I'm still sort of looking for work as I have been, but it does take the pressure off of the Jobcentre being on your back all the time. Because you know if you don't fulfil their criteria, or if they decide that you haven't fulfilled their criteria, then they're just going to stop your money.*"

Having 'signed on'[18] intermittently over the years, he says it is noticeable that the experience has got worse under the recent Conservative-led governments and states that there are times when it feels that the Jobcentre try to find "*any excuse*" to stop people from receiving support through the welfare system.

> "*This is the first time I've applied for ESA, I've never tried going on the sick before. I've never really wanted to because it's always been my intention to sort of get back into work as quickly as possible. But yeah, the sanctions have definitely got a lot worse. They're definitely knuckling down a hell of a lot and not always...I mean sometimes fairly, but there are other times where it's not fair, and they just seem to be looking for any excuse to stop you.*"

He goes on to talk about his current housing circumstances. Living in low-level supported accommodation with people he did not know previously, George tells me

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[18] A colloquialism which refers to when an unemployed person applies for Job-Seekers Allowance (or the Job Seeker element of Universal Credit) from the Department for Work and Pensions.

that he was placed there by his housing provider around the same time that he started going to the community kitchen.

> *"Funnily enough, I've lived there nearly a year and a half now, but umm, I'm not really that tight with the people in the house, everybody kind of does their own thing, for the most part. Like one of my housemates, he goes down to the [drop-in centre] as well, so quite often we'll walk down together and walk back and that sort of thing, and that's the only time I'll see him. So umm, apart from if we pass each other on the stairs, we might say hello. We all got placed there."*

Despite living together for over a year, George and his housemates still live as strangers within the property, and in a previous conversation with me, he had relayed feelings of unease about his housing situation and had described one of his housemates in particular as "*antagonistic*". Because of our previous conversation, I was not surprised when he spoke about how living together within the same house can feel quite claustrophobic, and that he does not always feel comfortable being in the shared space of the kitchen.

> *"It's not always ideal when you're living with three other people, you know in a relatively small house anyway. It feels a bit claustrophobic; you know even in the evening, even if you just go there to make a cup of tea or do a bit of toast and someone comes wandering in, you know, you don't always want people…"*

George's housing circumstances and poor mental health were interconnected and affect his experience of food insecurity and capacity for self-care. Not feeling comfortable enough to cook in the shared kitchen of his temporary housing, George goes out to free food places when he doesn't have any money. And when he's "*got money*", spends it on ready meals and takeaways because "*it's just quicker really*", allowing him to spend less time in the communal area. While he does not feel comfortable in the kitchen, he also tells me that he has no motivation to cook for himself – which he used to enjoy doing. This in turn impacts on his expenditure as the ready meals and takeaways are expensive. He believes that this will change when he lives in a place of his own, and looks forward to getting back into cooking, which

he taught himself to do when he left home at 16. He hopes that this will also improve his mental health.

> *"I think when I have my own space, that's when I'm going to start to take account more of what I do. Buy my own food again, and do my own cooking, that's going to make a difference… I do think when I have my own place, that's when I'm gonna have a change in my attitude and start to get my own food and do my own cooking."*

While the application for ESA was prompted by his poor mental health, the decision to transition over from JSA was also encouraged by his supported housing worker, who believes it will increase the likelihood or speed at which he might get a council flat.

> *"My housing worker wanted me to apply, because it'll make it easier...make my case for getting my own property better through the Council… I'm hoping to get housed in my own place within the next few months.*

UK housing legislation enforced by Local Authorities is based on priority need[19] and is significantly impacted on by the current housing crisis. Like most popular cities in the UK, Bristol is experiencing a housing crisis caused by low social housing stock and high private rental markets, which far exceed the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate[20]. This means that people who typically would have accessed the social housing sector are unable to, due to a lack of availability, but are also excluded from the private rental market because of the disparity between LHA rates and the significantly higher private rental rates. For George, the impact of high rental rates means that he is unable to afford to rent privately and is temporarily housed through a social housing provider. Unfortunately, while he hopes that his ESA status would give him priority need for housing

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[19] You are categorised as priority need for housing if you: 1. Have children living with you; 2. Are pregnant; 3. Are aged 16 or 17; 4. Are a care leaver between 18 and 20; 5. Are homeless because of flood or fire; 6. Are deemed vulnerable by the Council.
[20] This refers to the maximum that housing related benefits will pay in relation to someone's bedroom requirements.

through the local authority, which would be permanent, this is unlikely because of the housing crisis, which means that the threshold for priority need for someone who is 'deemed vulnerable' due to a mental health condition is significantly higher than the threshold for ESA. To be 'deemed vulnerable' you would need to show that you are significantly more vulnerable than the average person when they are street homeless, and in reality, the local authority would expect to see sustained involvement with secondary mental health services and/or periods of institutionalisation as a result of more severe mental health diagnoses such as psychosis and schizophrenia. Anxiety and depression do not usually warrant a priority need status – particularly for men of working age with no physical health conditions.

Unfortunately, a month after this interview took place, George got into an altercation with his "*antagonistic*" housemate after having a few drinks and punched him in the face. The housing provider, operating a zero-tolerance policy on violence, evicted him immediately as a result. Despite his mental health issues, George was unable to get into emergency accommodation through the council because he was not deemed 'priority need' under the homelessness legislation, nor was he able to get into another temporary supported housing placement because he now had a history of violent behaviour in low-level supported accommodation. With very little choice, he decided to live in a tent in the wooded area of a local park and used drop-in services and free food places to clean his clothes, take showers and eat food. He was finally supported into high-level sheltered accommodation three months later by a local housing charity, starting the process of finding his own accommodation from the beginning again.

4.4 WELFARE, CITIZENSHIP AND PRECARITY

While this research does not focus on welfare benefits and reform specifically, anecdotal lived experiences shared by food aid recipients about food insecurity and welfare can provide insight into the everyday impact of austerity and welfare reform. Experiences which provide useful context for understanding encounters in sites of

food aid and for exploring food provisioning more generally. Through Leanne, Ian and George's experiences, we can see that food insecurity is intimately connected to experiences of financial hardship and the precarity of living on a very low income. Like many of the participants in this study, their income level and income security were determined by their receipt of benefits through the welfare system, which meant that they were particularly vulnerable to policy changes implemented through welfare reform under austerity. Their experiences tell us that welfare benefits are not currently providing adequate support, and for some, changes within the welfare system are actually intensifying and producing experiences of precarity. Considering these experiences, in this section I turn to look at the logic underpinning welfare reform, exploring how this indicates that welfare policy under austerity is embedded in neoliberal understandings of poverty and citizenship, which prioritise the 'active' citizen and undervalue care and complexity, leading many to seek support elsewhere, through sites such as those explored in the subsequent chapters.

Widely understood to be driven by the tenet that growth and development depend upon market competition, neoliberal logic asserts that human wellbeing is best advanced when we "allow market principles to permeate all aspects of life" (Standing, 2011, p. 1). Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has significantly influenced UK governing ideology (Brown, 2015; Monbiot, 2016; Standing, 2011), and notions of citizenship have become increasingly conceptualized in economic and moralistic terms. Where the idea of a 'good' citizen, particularly in the context of poverty and food insecurity, has been "tied to economic productivity and making good/ healthy choices, while those who are economically underproductive are marked as lazy, deviant, and irresponsible citizens" (de Souza, 2019, p. 22). Rhetoric that resonates with research into media and political discourse around food banks and poverty more broadly (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013; Wells & Caraher, 2014).

George's experiences provide an example of how the welfare system reflects this doxa of citizenship in practice, by not only promoting "paid work as the primary duty of the responsible citizen" (Andersen, 2019, p. 9), but by making access to benefits increasingly conditional upon behavioural requirements that are used to monitor, discipline and *condition* 'lazy, deviant and irresponsible' welfare claimants into good economically productive citizens through 'work-related activity'. This has

been particularly striking through welfare reform under austerity, where the introduction of the 'claimant commitment'[21] has both formalised and intensified this process, transforming welfare into a contractual and reciprocal agreement, far from a rights-based conceptualisation of welfare support, which is down to entitlement and need (Andersen, 2019; Fletcher, 2020). Meanwhile, Leanne and Ian's experiences highlight the frustration and discomfort often experienced when unable to be 'economically productive citizens' and how stereotypes – such as that of the single mother who has children to claim benefits and housing – impact on the individual, leaving people feeling judged, disempowered and often defensive.

Under austerity, a significant reduction in welfare entitlements was introduced which, along with higher conditionality, was legitimised through political discourse around 'responsibility', 'fairness' and 'dependency'. Rhetoric exemplified in George Osborne's 2010 speech introducing the 'new welfare state' (Politics, 2010):

> *"...together we have achieved what no one in our jobs before us has ever achieved: agreement on a radically new welfare state. A welfare state where it always pays to work. Where effort it always rewarded. And where fraud can no longer hide behind complexity. But if this welfare state is going to gain the trust of the British people, it needs to reflect the British sense of fair play. So, I can announce today that for the first time we will introduce a limit on the total amount of benefits any one family can receive. And the limit will be set according to this very simple principle: unless they have disabilities to cope with, no family should get more from living on benefits than the average family gets from going out to work. No more open-ended chequebook. A maximum limit on benefits for those out of work. Set at the level that the average working family earns. Money to families who need it – but not more money than families who go out to work. That is what the British people mean by fair."*

But while the government framed welfare reform as 'fair', it has been argued that with the introduction of the new welfare state, risk and responsibility for security and wellbeing shifted from the state onto the individual, and in doing so, the role of socioeconomic structures such as education, income, work, housing and health in driving inequality, insecurity and experiences of precarity have been disavowed by

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[21] The Claimant Commitment are the conditions laid out for claiming welfare – responsibilities of the claimant and consequences for not meeting them.

government (Brown, 2015; Cummins, 2016; Monbiot, 2015; Standing, 2011; Thompson et al., 2018; Wacquant, 1996, 2008). The impact of this, for people like Leanne, Ian and George, has meant that for many living on welfare benefits, the 'new welfare state' has itself become a structural barrier to financial and food security because it prioritises policies which 'make work pay', and does not operate a rights-based approach to support (Andersen, 2019). Unable to work due to caring responsibilities, and health and disability reasons, Leanne, Ian and George describe being caught by welfare policies designed for short-term transitional support into employment, welfare policies which provide inadequate income in order to deter welfare 'dependency'.

Channeling Wacquant's (1996, 2007, 2008) understanding of 'advanced marginality', their stories exemplify how marginalised people and communities become economically, physically and spatially disconnected from wider society because of structural barriers to full citizenship (Thompson et al., 2018), which in this circumstance is due to a welfare system that values paid work and self-reliance. Speaking to this process of marginalisation, I found that for welfare claimants such as Leanne, Ian and George – who are unable to work and therefore 'economically unproductive' citizens – there is a widening gap between welfare support and lived experience, in which people get caught in cycles of precarity and hardship *within* welfare. For example, with Leanne, precarity is maintained by child-related policies that neither provide her with sufficient income, nor enable her to go back to work, highlighting a paradoxical logic, where government promote paid employment as the 'solution' to poverty yet implement policies such as childcare subsidies that can prevent lone parents on a low-income – and women in particular – from entering or re-entering work. For Ian, the cycle is created by the benefit freeze and the bedroom tax, which combined, significantly reduce his income in real terms. Unable to work and unable to move because of his disability and health conditions, Ian is stuck in a state of precarity in which he feels powerless to affect change. While for George, this relates to low LHA rates and the lack of social housing stock, which have contributed to a housing crisis. At first, he was stuck in temporary housing which negatively impacted on his mental health, and consequently affected his capacity to work and led to experiences of food insecurity. But after he was evicted for violence, another pattern emerged, that of the revolving door of homelessness.

The experiences shared by Leanne, Ian and George are not dissimilar to those relayed by the other 18 service users I interviewed, and service users I encountered in the field. As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, almost all of the participants in this study, who accessed sites of food aid because of food insecurity, were in receipt of welfare benefits and told me problems or challenges they had experienced related to the welfare system. While welfare reform and neoliberal ideology in policy making is not the focus of this research, I found it important to highlight the ways in which encounters with the state directly impact on the everyday of food aid and food insecurity, because feelings of frustration and a lack of agency or entrapment were present in each of the interviewees stories. For many, the welfare system played a direct role in their experience of food insecurity, and therefore experiences and interactions with welfare are crucial for understanding the rise in food insecurity and emergence of the food aid sector in the UK.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the ways in which welfare policies are experienced by those who are among the most marginalised in society, this chapter has sought to exemplify the disempowering effect of current neoliberal welfare policies, as well as show how food insecurity is an interconnected phenomenon. The inadequacy of current welfare provision, particularly articulated in punitive conditionality and insufficient levels of income, lead many into circumstances of destitution, entrenched poverty, or persistent vulnerability. Cuts to public services have compounded inequalities in society, particularly where cuts have been made to services which would have provided preventative support, for example, with mental health provision. And the widespread lack of investment into social housing has had a devastating impact on the perpetuation of poverty and lack of social mobility. All this, in a society still reeling from an economic crisis, where the proliferation of insecure and low-paid employment has stripped away the security of labour, and we are now seeing higher rates of in-work poverty. Food insecurity is a symptom of this broken system, and though it can be alleviated through community-based projects, such as those that I explore in this thesis, the underlying causes of food insecurity are structural and affected by government's approach to public service cuts, welfare reform, housing and employment. In the following chapters, I explore how these community-based

food aid services work and operate on an everyday basis, to show how they can be complex sites of care, discipline, control, and sociality.

5.1 THE PLACE: EASTON & ITS FOOD BANKS

The food banks I worked with were based in Easton, a ward on the eastern edge of inner-city Bristol that backs onto Barton Hill – where the community kitchen is based – and is bordered by both the M32 and the dual carriageway, 'St Philips Causeway'. Praised for being 'Bristol's coolest neighbourhood' (Jones, 2019), Easton is one of the most socially, culturally and ethnically diverse areas of the city, and has received a lot of positive publicity in recent years for being a community-centred neighbourhood; home to a variety of independent businesses, community and mutual aid groups, and host to pop-up events such as 'The Grand Iftar' held on St Mark's Road high street by the local mosque[22] (see Figure 4). In 2019, St Mark's Road was even voted 'the best road in the UK' by the Academy of Urbanism, for 'bringing people together' (BBC, 2019); which is quite a contrast to the historic reputation of the high street it intersects with – Stapleton Road – which until recently, had been labelled one of the UK's most dangerous roads[23] though not without controversy (Wilson, 2019).

While Easton is certainly identifiable as this community centred, liberal and 'cool' neighbourhood, it is also one of the more visibly unequal parts of the city because of recent gentrification. A densely populated and historically disadvantaged area, Easton has become a highly desirable part of the city to live in, and house prices have increased by 120% over the past ten years (Brignall, 2020)[24]. The rental markets have significantly increased alongside this, which has led to growing inequality in the area, compounded by the opening of more expensive cafes and bars. Spatially, the inequality is particularly visible when comparing the inner area of Easton around St Mark's Road and Greenbank, and the edges of Easton nearer Stapleton Road, the M32, and the dual carriageway – where fly tipping, housing quality, traffic and air quality are worse. The effect of this has meant that for many,

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[22] The Grand Iftar was first held in 2017 as a response to the Manchester arena bombings and growing hostility towards Muslims in the UK. In collaboration with other partners, it has been held each year since and brings together approximately 5,000 people to communally share the breaking of the fast and to talk about the significance of Ramadan - though in 2020 this was sadly unable to take place because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

[23] Though the award may be in light of the work done in the area to combat such reputations.

[24] According to Rightmove, Easton house prices have increased more than any other area in the UK in the last decade.

Easton is a neighbourhood of dualities, where communities may coexist, but do not always integrate in the way that has been presented through these awards. It is an impact of gentrification that is often overlooked in favour of talking about 'community' in the area.

When talking about inequality, particularly in the context of food insecurity, it is important to think about access. In many parts of the city, food insecurity is created, or amplified by a lack of access to local affordable food shops – but in Easton this is not the case. This makes it an interesting site of research, because it is well connected to the rest of the city via bus links, roads and an internal train station, and is within walking distance from the central shopping district. In fact, for participants living in or near this area, food insecurity was largely driven by financial hardship rather than issues relating to access; because not only is Easton well connected in terms of transport, it also has a wide offering of affordable, cultural and local food shops on both St Mark's Road and Stapleton Road. Though there are also a multitude of takeaways, leading to it sometimes being referred to as a 'food swamp'.

Figure 4: St Mark's Road during the 'Grand Iftar' 2018. (Photo by author).

5.1 The food bank sites

Based in amongst a residential area, St Mark's Road high street plays an important role in this ethnography, because it is where the first food bank in East Bristol was opened and is where I began this fieldwork. The road itself curves round from Stapleton Road and is home to a number of independents shops and restaurants, including a local supermarket (the celebrated 'Sweetmart'); a halal butchers; two pharmacies; an artisan bakery; two community cafes; a pub; a church that has been converted into supported living accommodation; and a church and mosque that face each other near the end of the road. It is usually busy at all times of the day with foot traffic and deliveries (even during the 2020 lockdown) and is colourful – with artwork and sculptures on the side of buildings, and fairy lights streaming across overhead at night in the winter. At the time of my fieldwork, the 'East Bristol Foodbank' had been distributing food from this road for six years, based in St Mark's Baptist Church opposite the Easton Jamia Masjid. Operating as part of the

Trussell Trust Foodbank network, it is run by a local charity – 'Crisis Centre Ministries'[25] – who are well-known in the area for providing support services for vulnerable people in the community. When they first opened their food bank outlet on St Mark's Road, they distributed food through the popular 'Saint Mark's Community Café' (which is attached to the church) but soon moved into the larger church hall because of high and increasing demand for the food bank (see Figure 5). While St Mark's was the first site for the 'East Bristol Foodbank', before long they expanded across East Bristol in order to meet this rising demand, and to prevent people from having to travel long distances to access the food bank[26]. In 2017, when I started this fieldwork, there were four different food bank distribution outlets operating - two in Easton, one in Fishponds and one in Kingswood (see Figure 6**Error! Reference source not found.**). Importantly, each of these outlets were open at different times in order to provide support for people throughout the week; and in Easton, where I focus this research, the outlets were 'Tudor Road' food bank, which was open on Wednesdays from 12.30-2pm, and 'St Mark's' food bank, which was open every Friday from 2-4.15pm and was the last food bank operating before the weekend.

Though only a five-minute walk between the two outlets in Easton, the food banks had very different atmospheres. The St Mark's food bank was the more popular of the two, which was partly due to being the last food bank open before the weekend but was also because of its location in a well-known and visible site - where people could also get a free meal, or a cup of tea and a slice of cake from the community café if they came early enough (they closed at 2pm). When they first moved the food bank into the church hall at St Mark's, the food bank bought small round foldaway tables that they could position in the food bank to feel like a continuation of this café; so that when people entered, it wouldn't feel like you'd just walked into a church. In addition, because they were placed apart from one another, with a vase of bright fake flowers on top, they also offered the food bank clients privacy in a time of vulnerability (see Figure 7).

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[25] Crisis Centre Ministries' core services also include a drop-in centre for rough sleepers, a women's night shelter, and an addiction and abuse recovery service – in 2020 they rebranded as 'inHope'.
[26] Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and high need within South Bristol, they have expanded their reach and now have outlets south of the river, which means they are now called 'South and East Bristol Foodbank'.

Located just behind the train station and a two-minute walk from the bus stop on Stapleton Road, the St Mark's food bank was easy to access and hard to miss if you happened to walk past, as it is also signposted on the community café's poster outside. In contrast, the Tudor Road food bank was found in a church building tucked away on a quiet residential road, with one sign advertising 'food bank' barely visible from the main road it was adjacent to (see Figure 8). It was noticeable that without the visibility of the community café, food bank clients often got lost finding the space, most often turning up at St Mark's, but sometimes even going to a 'Tudor Road' in St Paul's on the other side of the M32 (this happened more than a few times). Within the church hall itself, the food bank tried to elicit the café feel of St Mark's, placing bright tablecloths and the same fake flowers on each of the tables. But, using the permanent rectangular tables belonging to the church building, it was harder to create this atmosphere, and even harder still to give people privacy (see Figure 9).

In part due to the timing and location of Tudor Road food bank, the average number of food parcels distributed (8-10 a week) was approximately half of those distributed in St Mark's (15-20) – of course, at pinch points in the year this increased, such as over winter and in particular the run up to Christmas. Though even then, it felt less rushed than St Mark's did on a normal Friday. The benefit of this was that clients would have more of an opportunity to talk to staff and volunteers and discuss their situation in more depth. However, over time, because of lower demand and lack of visibility of the food bank (in addition to the cramped church hall and the fact that the storeroom was located up a rickety staircase), the Wednesday session at Tudor Road moved, and now also takes place in St Mark's Baptist Church. But this did not happen until the year after I left the field.

Figure 5: Outside St Mark's food bank (left) and Community Café (right). (Photo by author).
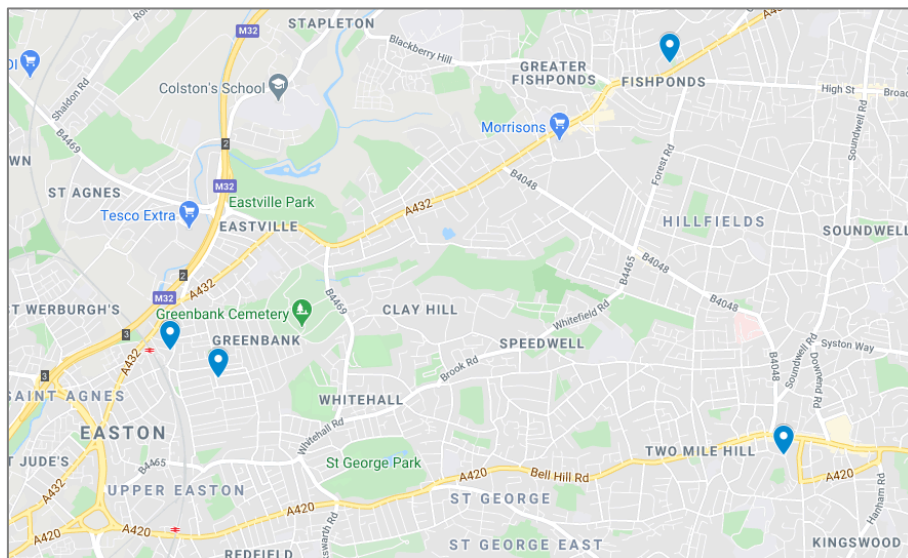
Figure 6: East Bristol Food Banks. (Google Map).

Figure 7: St Mark's food bank. (Photo by author).

Figure 8: East Bristol Foodbank sign outside Tudor Road food bank. (Photo from Crisis Centre Ministries).

Figure 9: Tudor Road food bank. (Photo by author).

6. THE FOOD BANKS

Exploring structural drivers of food insecurity and food aid use in the 'The System is Broken', I now turn to the sites of food aid themselves. In this chapter, I explore 'East Bristol Foodbank', a well-established Trussell Trust food bank based in East Bristol. Using the five operational stages of the Trussell Trust food bank model to guide discussion (Garthwaite, 2016a), this chapter examines the everyday of the food bank, paying particular attention to the food provided in the food bank, everyday acts of agency and choice, and encounters between volunteers and food bank clients. In so doing, I show how the food bank can be a site of possibility for both care and discipline.

6.1 THE TRUSSELL TRUST MODEL

As part of the franchise network, the East Bristol Foodbank follows the same food bank operation model as every other Trussell Trust food bank. Describing how this works, Garthwaite (2016a, p. 37) explains that it involves five key stages (see Figure 10):

1. Food is donated by the public
2. The food is sorted by volunteers and 'banked' in distribution centre storage and warehouse locations
3. Frontline care professionals distribute food bank vouchers to people who are deemed food insecure and in crisis
4. Food bank vouchers are then exchanged in a food bank distribution centre, effectively 'withdrawing' three days' worth of 'emergency' food
5. People are offered additional support and signposting through the 'More than Food' programme – an initiative set up "to help people resolve the crises that they face" (The Trussell Trust, 2020a).
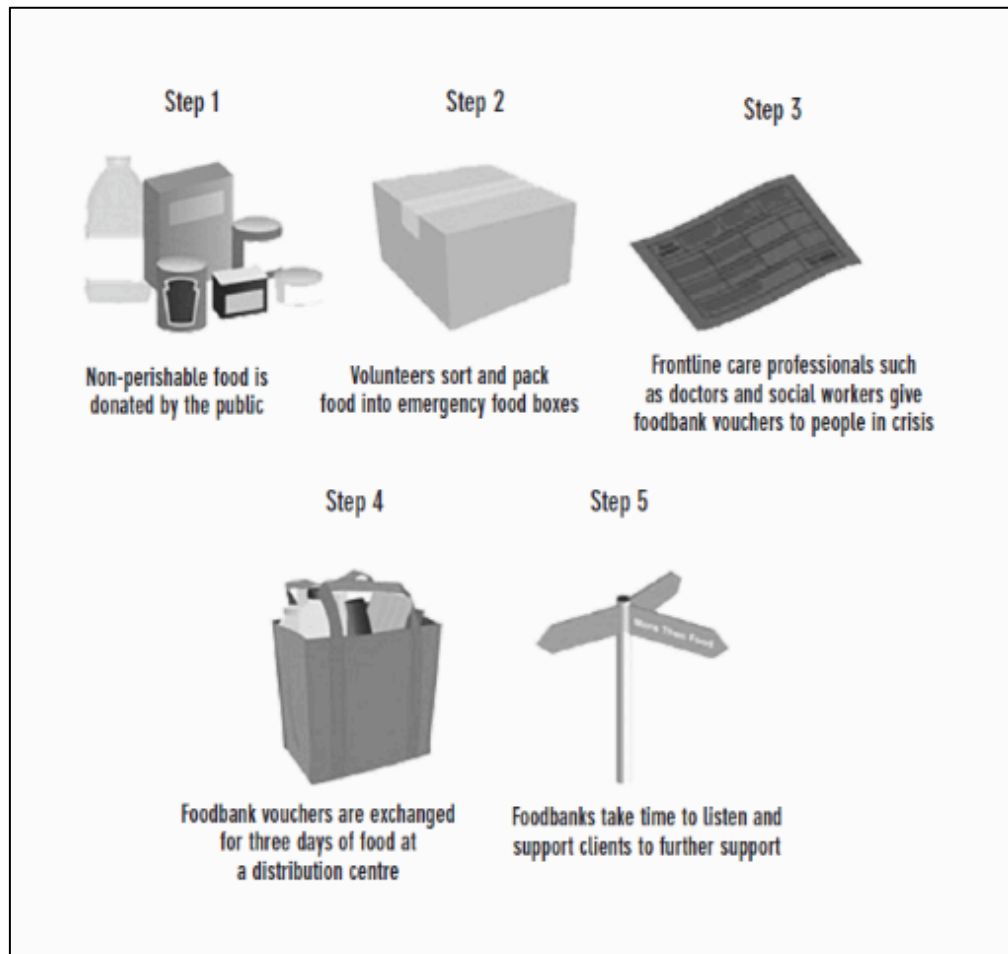
Figure 10: The five stages in the operation of Trussell Trust foodbanks. (Garthwaite, 2016).

Though many independent food banks also operate similar food bank models, the Trussell Trust model offers local groups the means to quickly and sustainably establish a food bank by providing them with all of the necessary infrastructural resources and guidance. In exchange, Trussell Trust franchises pay a yearly subscription fee, submit data on their service users, agree to the aims and vision of the Trussell Trust, and take part in a yearly audit to ensure they are following protocol effectively (Lambie-Mumford, 2013; The Trussell Trust, 2020b). This is important because it provides a ready to use model of food aid that can be applied in any locality. As the East Bristol Foodbank Manager stated:

> *"I like it, because I'm constantly being updated with the latest*
> *things that I need to get into…you have masses of support…When*
> *we first started, them in Bristol North West [Foodbank] and us*
> *here, there were other people who were thinking of starting food*

> *things, who were just shouting 'ooh you've got to pay this money, and what a load of rubbish, and this is like a national thing taking over'. [It] never felt like that, never felt taken over or anything, it's just...I've just felt supported and challenged in the right way really. Franchise is good, yeah, not just sayin' it."*

Key to what makes the Trussell Trust franchise system work, is its reliance on the 'triple donation model' – where resources of food, time and space are donated. This is where church resources have been particularly beneficial to the expansion and sustainability of the Trussell Trust food bank network. An early study of the food banking system (Lambie, 2011) suggested that quick growth in the network has been partly due to being church led. Lambie suggests that this can be attributed to inherent capacity because of the number and spread of churches nation-wide, coupled with the notion that food banks provide Christians with a tool to practice their faith, which then supplies the food bank with motivated volunteers (Lambie, 2011, p. iv). This certainly resonates with East Bristol, whose volunteers and staff were primarily recruited through church networks, and whose outlets were each situated in church buildings. Discussing this during a focus group, the St Mark's volunteers reinforced Lambie's findings, stating:

> *"Volunteer 1: ...churches have a lot of people to draw on as well, you can go 'yeah we want to set up this food bank'.*
>
> *Volunteer 2: A lot of likeminded people, a lot of people who are gonna say 'yes! that's what we believe in, we'll get behind it'.*
>
> *Volunteer 1: A lot of people who are being told every week from the pulpit 'you need to try and make a difference, you need to be nice to your neighbour', go 'oh how can I do that?'. Oh well the church is doing a food bank, you can get involved in that!"*

Aside from church networks, another significant source of volunteer resource is through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) days - where businesses pay their staff to volunteer in the charity sector. Occurring at different points throughout the year, these CSR days were particularly popular in the lead up to Christmas when the food banks were at their busiest – both in terms of use and donations - and in the fortnight running up to Christmas it was not unusual to find teams of lawyers or

bankers huddled in the back room packing endless boxes of mince pies and roast dinner themed foods into Christmas bags[27].

Coming back to the universality of the Trussell Trust model, it is necessary to acknowledge that "different franchises may often operate quite differently – with organizational capacity, size, ways of working, clientele, donor networks, staffing, and political outlook all combining to produce highly localised spaces of provision" (Williams et al., 2016, p. 2296). Because of this, it is fair to say that the 'everyday' of a food bank in East Bristol will be different from a food bank in North Bristol. Indeed, even the two Easton food bank outlets were different, despite being run by the same organisation. Therefore, as I illustrate in this chapter, it is just as important to pay attention to place and the everydayness of the individual food banks, as it is important to pay attention to the wider food banking system and its role in relation to welfare.

6.2 DONATIONS (STAGE ONE)

The vast majority (over 90%) of food distributed by food banks is donated by the public through collection points in supermarkets, churches and schools (among other locations), as well as from in-person donations to the food bank outlets, and 'food collection drives' in Tesco supermarkets. Supermarkets are a significant donation pathway, and on the East Bristol Foodbank website, they advertise three main collection points for donations in East Bristol - Tesco's, Sainsburys and Co-op – donation sites which are not dissimilar to other food banks in the network. As the largest food bank network in the UK, the Trussell Trust have a high profile, and have established a number of national partnerships with corporate supermarkets and other sponsors who donate food, money, equipment and time to food banks across the UK. Their longest-standing partnership is with Tesco who host their 'food collection drive' days at different points in the year where food bank volunteers hand out

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[27] But what is significant about this is how corporates use CSR volunteering days, not just as acts of altruistic 'good-will', but as CSR *opportunities* for corporate businesses to gain favour in the public eye. This was particularly well evidenced by the donations that corporate businesses would make around the holiday periods, when the food banks turned into endless photo opportunities for corporate volunteers dropping off advent calendars or Easter eggs for 'needy' children.

'shopping lists' at the entrance to Tesco to encourage shoppers to donate to the food banks. On these days, Tesco run a 'top-up' scheme where they give a cash donation of 20% of the value of the food that customers donate (calculated based on weight)[28].

Informed by nutritionists, the Trussell Trust have a 'standard packing list' that makes up a basic food parcel, and food banks make requests to the public for these items to be donated (see Figure 11). The food distributed by food banks is non-perishable, dried or tinned food, that can be safely stored for long periods of time. This is because food banks are run as pop-up emergency food aid providers, which means they are open for only a few hours a week, often in spaces that are used by other groups. Consequently, they usually have limited storage capacity on-site, as well as limited access to the space during the week. Therefore, to reduce waste, all items donated need to be long-life ambient foods that can be stored in a warehouse. In addition to this, it means that items taken home by food bank clients are guaranteed to stay 'fresh' for a longer period of time.

But in reality, the public donate what they want to donate. And while the rationale for donating is beyond the scope of this research, myself and other volunteers found ourselves imagining what the people donating food (or toiletries) thought about food insecurity and food bank clients by examining the items donated. Rather like Shipps (2021) study of charitable knitting, it was felt that people have an image or idea of the type of person food is being donated to that influenced their purchasing habits, along with 'thrift', and public discourse on poverty. This was particularly evident with the overflowing boxes of tampons and sanitary towels that never shifted, thought by volunteers to be connected to period poverty making the headlines shortly before I started volunteering. When looking at 'basic' or 'essential' range items donated, volunteers questioned why people donate cheap food when they are unlikely to eat those brands themselves – "what does this say about what they think of them?" one volunteer asked me. While interestingly another volunteer looked at this practically, suggesting it would mean they were able to donate a higher quantity of items for their money – a thrifty form of shopping, for distant others (Miller, 1998). But it was not just low-cost branded foods that were donated. Around

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[28] Prior to 2016 the Tesco 'top-up' was 30% (Caplan, 2016)

Christmas time various non-essential food items were donated, and a memorable conversation centered around the donation of a set of six different gourmet chutneys. In response to these more expensive (and often less practical) items, volunteers wondered firstly, whether people understood what hunger actually looked like, and secondly, whether those donating felt that people experiencing hardship deserved a 'treat' at Christmas time – for just because people are unable to afford food, it does not mean they should eat food that is of poor quality or miss out on conventional Christmas fare. In reality, it is likely that all of these thoughts and motivations were at play, but as I did not interview people donating to food banks, I can only reflect on the conversations that took place between volunteers on this matter.
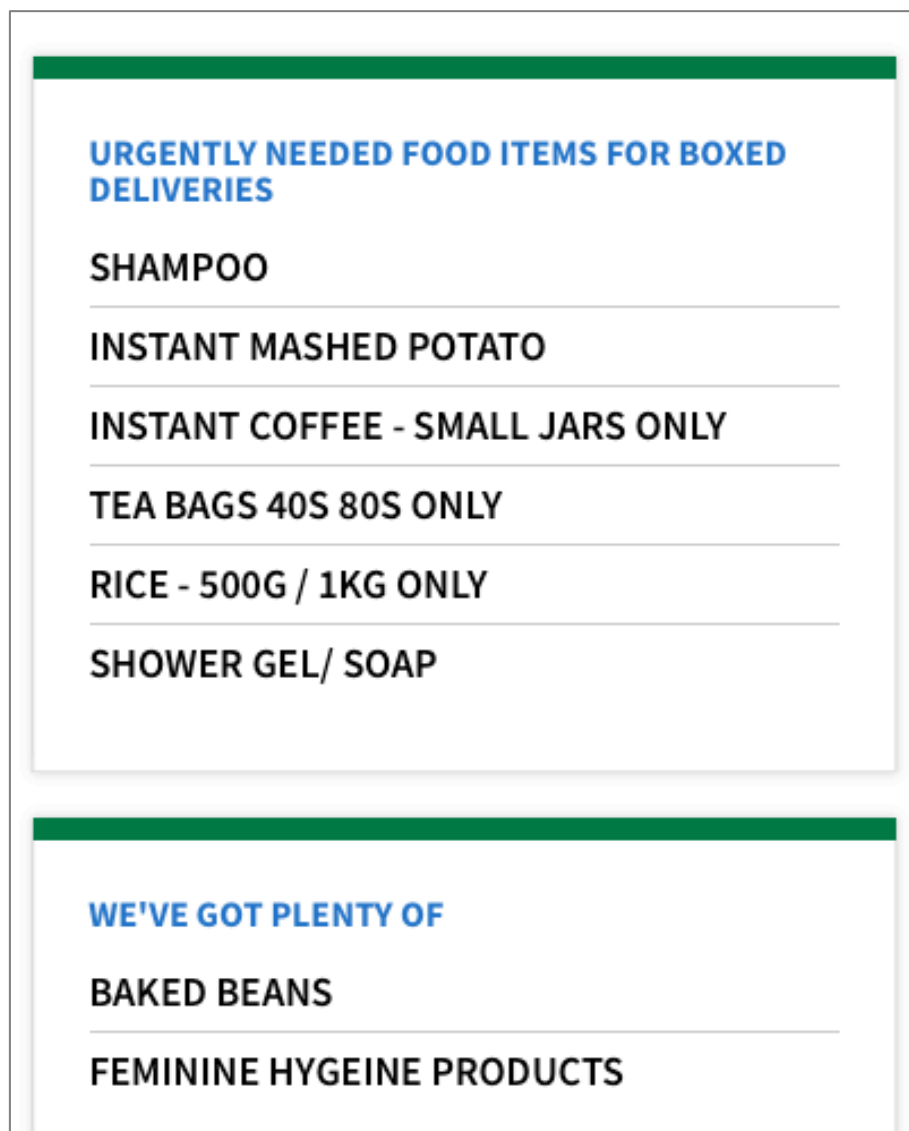
Figure 11: Items East Bristol Foodbank are currently requesting. (Screenshot from East Bristol Foodbank website June 2020).

6.3 'BANKING' (STAGE TWO)

The vast majority of food that is donated (along with other items such as nappies, toiletries and pet food) is stored in the East Bristol Foodbank warehouse, where items are sorted, monitored, and distributed across the different food bank outlets in East Bristol. Each of these outlets have smaller storage cupboards on-site (see Figure 12), which are replenished from the warehouse stock each week, and due to a burglary at the St Mark's site a few years before I conducted research, the staff were particularly cautious about leaving items out of sight of windows and locking the cupboard doors at the end of each session. Contributing to a feeling of 'protectiveness' over the food.

For the first month when I started fieldwork at the St Mark's food bank, I volunteered in the storeroom. Storeroom tasks included weighing bags of donations to calculate the amount of food donated (information that was fed into the Trussell Trust's national dataset); sorting through the food to make sure items were undamaged and 'in date' according to the 'best before' and 'use by' dates, then writing the expiration dates on items in black marker pen to make sure they were visible when packing food parcels; and finally, packing the food parcels and taking them out to the food bank clients according to the order they arrived. Located in the back of the building in an area only accessible to staff and volunteers, the storeroom was a fairly relaxed environment and after the initial hour rush of the food bank session, I spent much of my time chatting and drinking tea with the other storeroom/back-of-house volunteers. Interestingly, during the hours that the food bank was open, the front of house and back of house volunteers worked as two distinct teams, and often if a session was busy (or sometimes even when not) interaction between the two was fleeting. This contributed to the creation of two distinct atmospheres within the food bank that was marked by the space as well as movement of volunteers and encounters taking place within those spaces. At Tudor Road food bank this was particularly the case, as the storeroom was up a staircase, far away from the hall below.

Figure 12: St Mark's on-site store cupboards. (Photo by author).

6.4 REFERRAL VOUCHERS (STAGE THREE)

Like every Trussell Trust food bank in the network, to get a food parcel from the East Bristol Foodbank, you must first obtain a food bank voucher from a referral agency.

Referral agencies are established at a local level by each food bank and are made up of frontline care professionals, such as social workers, doctors, health visitors, schools and Citizens Advice (Trussell Trust, 2020c) among others, such as the Jobcentre Plus and Bristol City Council's Local Crisis Prevention Team who together, made up a fifth of all referrals during my time in the field – this is despite the DWP's official standing that the Jobcentre only 'signpost' to food banks (Mason & Butler, 2014). To become a referral agency, frontline care professionals are 'registered' with the food bank and are then provided with food bank vouchers to distribute to households and individuals who they deem to be food insecure. May et al. (2019) refer to this process as a form of 'moral outsourcing' because it shifts the

responsibility for deciding who should and who should not receive support – the "ethical dilemma" (p. 1264) – onto the referral agent, rather than the food bank volunteers. A process among many in the food bank that May et al. (2019) liken to bureaucracy within the welfare system itself.

Until recently, the Trussell Trust operated a strict three-voucher 'rule', where an individual could only be referred to a food bank three times within any six-month period. In theory, this meant that people would be turned away from accessing the food bank if they had already exchanged three vouchers.

> *"When we started it was very much, 'yeah, we're short-term help, we don't want to create dependency, so three vouchers - that's it!' After that we'll kind of [pause] I was in a habit of just turning people away, then we'd then contact the agency and go, 'they've had their three, that's it, can't have anymore'." – Assistant Manager, East Bristol Foodbank*

It was a policy designed with the intention of preventing *dependency* (another process which is said to mirror welfare logic), aimed at maintaining the food bank as a 'temporary' intervention devised to work symbiotically with support agencies and government. If working effectively, the food bank system was designed to fill a gap in provision, "whilst state or other voluntary providers [were] able to get appropriate assistance for an individual in place" (Lambie-Mumford, 2013, p. 76).

In essence, the food bank was designed to treat the symptoms of food insecurity by ensuring that people did not go hungry, while the responsibility for addressing the underlying causes lay with statutory services. However, amidst the changing landscape of welfare provision and various cuts to frontline services under austerity, this distinction between the statutory sector and VCSE sector has become blurred (Strong, 2020a). Remarking on this change, the East Bristol Foodbank Manager stated:

> *"...Our whole idea of having three vouchers was related to how long it would take to get your [welfare] payments paid. But now, now that we know that payments take up to five or six weeks to get*

> *paid - for Universal Credit for example - we've got to...you know*
> *we can't just ignore that."*

In response to the impact of benefit delays, cuts, and the six-week wait for those transitioning over to Universal Credit (now a five-week wait), the Trussell Trust lifted their three-voucher limit, and instead used the vouchers as part of a flagging system, where exchanging a fourth voucher prompts support through the 'More Than Food' programme (discussed in more depth in section 6.6). This happened in East Bristol Foodbank just after I started my fieldwork, and though it allowed people to use the food bank more than three times, it was now up to the discretion of the food bank *how many* times. This was a significant shift in responsibility, as prior to the flagging system, discerning 'need' was solely the responsibility of the referral agencies. Like May et al. (2019, p. 1266) found in their research, this discretion "move[s] around a number of criteria, including judgements about 'genuine' need, the responsible stewardship of resources, and the apparent honesty of claimants". And on a number of occasions, I heard staff or volunteers commenting that someone *shouldn't* get support because 'they've had enough', despite the fact that what 'enough' looked like depended on the individual in question, which meant that the decision-making became subjective – for example, most often those who were perceived by staff or volunteers as deserving of support were clients who had children or were 'engaging with More than Food'. Through comments and conversations with food bank volunteers and staff, the implication was that these were clients who, actively supporting others or trying to address the causes of their crisis with the food bank, were acting 'responsibly', and therefore the food bank were open to supporting these individuals for longer.

It's worth noting that this change in policy was not publicly announced, and it is likely that this ambiguity around provision was intentional. This is because on a practical level, the three-voucher policy helps the food banks to be able to meet demand. With rapidly increasing numbers of people accessing food banks across the UK, it is partly a question of capacity, and in some areas of the country, food banks have had to turn people away because of insufficient stock (Iafrati, 2016). Politically, lifting the three-voucher limit *quietly* reduces the likelihood of attracting undesired media coverage purporting that food banks enable dependency and relieve pressure

on government to reform austerity policies. By retaining this ambiguity, the Trussell Trust maintain their status as a short-term intervention, working "within a wider system of support" (Lambie-Mumford, 2013: 76). However, the detrimental impact of this covert approach has been that participants in my study who would have benefitted from additional food support within a six-month period, were unaware that this was an option as many referral agencies continued to relay the three-voucher rule. As exemplified by a participant who told me they were saving (or rationing) their allowance for when it got *really* bad, despite already experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity because their GP could only refer them three times.

6.4.1 THE SCARLET LETTER

> *Glancing over at the entrance as I say goodbye to a client, I see that a queue has started to form. I walk over to help the volunteer working on the reception desk and ask one of the women waiting for their referral voucher. She reaches into her bag for her purse and after a moment reveals the voucher folded up as small as possible. She doesn't meet my eye contact and seems a bit embarrassed about being in the food bank. Looking at her voucher, it strikes me that she was trying to conceal it. (Fieldnotes 12th January 2018)*

Going to a food bank is not simply a practical matter of sourcing a food bank voucher and going along to the food bank, even provided you know where to go and how to get a food bank voucher – which is not always clear, as referral agencies are not universal even within the same city. It can be a challenging experience *emotionally*. While the feeling and experience of not having 'enough' money is a subjective and often universally experienced phenomenon, there is something very different about not having 'enough' money to afford *food*, because your basic rights[29] and needs are not being met. This can be a scary, and often embarrassing situation for people.

> *"People don't like to accept help. People cry about it, but as soon as it's offered to them, you feel embarrassed in a sense. Because a lot of people will take, you know what I mean? Money and shit,*

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[29] The 'right to adequate food' is recognised as a basic human right by the United Nations.

*people will take – benefits, people will take. But 'oh my god are
you struggling, you and your family, like for real - foodwise?
Okay, what do you need?' and you're like 'shit!', don't really want
to say, in a sense...I felt really embarrassed!" - Hana, food bank
client*

*"Obviously, it's a little bit...I wouldn't say degrading, because
that feels a little bit harsh. But, just having to be so reliant on an
organisation – on the state – to eat, it's quite scary, yeah. Uneasy
– unsettling. Obviously, it's a lovely environment, they have tea
and coffee and it's run by really nice people and stuff. Just the
actual process is, almost degrading, yeah. I dunno." - Jack, food
bank client*

As I illustrated in the literature review, feelings of shame and embarrassment are
commonly reported in the research on food banks. And while the food bank vouchers
were not designed to mark shame or embarrassment, they are visually striking –
bright red like the 'scarlet letter' in Hawthorne's puritanical colony – and are easy to
identify, becoming a 'visible marker of stigma' (May et al., 2019, p. 1263). These
red paper vouchers were the most commonly used referral process in East Bristol –
though the Trussell Trust had started to build up their 'e-referral' system, which
enabled referral agencies to issue vouchers via text and email, this was not as
mainstream as it is today[30]. Through discussions with volunteers and service users, I
found that the use of red vouchers added an unnecessary hoop for the person in crisis
to jump through, because in order to obtain a food bank voucher the person in crisis
would have to travel to the referral agent in order to pick up the voucher to take to
the food bank – which could then only be used within a short period of time (usually
within a few weeks of distribution). Importantly, these vouchers only hold value
within the food bank, and even then, only in the food bank listed on the voucher (see
Figure 13). If the person in question lived far away from frontline agencies, as many
in Bristol do, it created an additional barrier to access, particularly if they could not
afford the bus fare to pick up the voucher in the first place or had childcare or caring
responsibilities that prevent them from travelling.

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[30] More recently the Trussell Trust have operated an e-referral system to use instead of/alongside the
paper system – which has been particularly useful during the covid-19 pandemic. Though this takes
away the visual representation of shame, it does not subvert this dynamic from the food bank.

Obtaining a voucher involves the person in crisis being assessed – to what extent, is up to the discretion of the referral agent – and deemed 'in need' of food support. It is a process of justification that is carried over to the food bank in many instances by the clients themselves, who seek to articulate their 'deservedness' when they hand over their vouchers, telling volunteers their circumstances, why they have come, and the legitimacy of their support needs. From my experience, such conversations could often lead to constructive action, whereby I discover something additional about their circumstances that the food bank can provide support with through the 'More Than Food' programme; but more often than not, it also felt like clients were justifying their need, were anxious and embarrassed about being there and concerned that I might refuse them support if they did not explain. Therefore, were keen to emphasise their faultlessness in the process, lest I judge them 'irresponsible' or 'lazy'. This excerpt relays one such occasion:

> *...telling me his situation, he was sweating profusely - which he kept apologising for, saying it was a consequence of anxiety. Explaining himself, he tells me, "people don't think what I'm saying is happening because I look quite tidy, but there's nothing wrong with looking tidy when your life isn't". This reminded me of this idea of 'the look of poverty', and how perceptions can be misleading when people come into the food bank, coupled by this idea of having to convince people of your situation. The stigma attached to not seeming like you deserve it. (Fieldnotes 27th June 2018)*

This scenario highlights the precarity of the food bank experience because in that encounter, I (the volunteer) was the one with the power to provide them with food, I was the 'giver', and they were the 'receiver' of charitable food – which is an imbalanced power dynamic that compounded feelings of insecurity in the service user.

Figure 13: East Bristol Foodbank Referral Voucher. (Photo provided by the Assistant Foodbank Manager).

6.5 'WITHDRAWING' FOOD PARCELS (STAGE FOUR)

Once the red voucher has exchanged hands, a volunteer sits down with the food bank client to discuss their food parcel. This is an opportunity for the volunteer to check through the voucher to ensure that all the information is filled out correctly (necessary for the Trussell Trust's data collection), and to explain how the food bank works if it is someone's first time there. The volunteers ask set questions about food preferences and additional needs to determine what should go into their food parcel – "do you have any allergies or dietary requirements" – "have you got cooking facilities at home?" – "do you have a tin opener?" – "would you like tea or coffee?" – "pasta or rice?" – "do you need any toiletries?" (see Figure 14). Though not strictly food, toiletry products have become more commonplace in food banks in recent years – in particular, with public campaigning around 'period poverty' and the controversy surrounding the 'tampon tax'. After the volunteers have asked these questions, they take this information (see Figure 15) out back to the team working in the storeroom in order for them to make up their food parcel (or *up* – depending on which food bank site it was).

While the food parcel is being processed in the storeroom, which usually takes about 10-15 minutes, the client is encouraged to drink a cup of tea or coffee and to eat a sweet snack. Depending on what is available, this will be a biscuit, some chocolate or a slice of cake – a form of 'feel good food' that is comforting and indulgent. This is a commonplace practice employed by service providers to subvert the discomfort that people feel in these spaces, and to elicit a feeling of hospitality and welcome. While they wait, clients are also told to "help yourself to any extra items" that have been donated to the food bank while they wait for their *proper* food parcel. These 'extra items' are displayed in boxes slightly out of the way at the side of the room (see Figure 16 & Figure 17) and comprise of food that 'does not go' in a food parcel because they don't fit the criteria (again see Figure 15) along with any expired, or close to expiring products (before the 'use by' date). Sometimes the St Mark's food bank also had donations of 'Veg on the Edge' from a local organic farm – who, at the end of the week would donate the fruit and veg that they could no longer sell (see Figure 18). While there were occasions where volunteers had to pick out produce that had definitely 'turned', for the most part, it was as fresh as you would buy in a shop and was often met with surprise and appreciation by food bank clients. However, it is important to note that this was not a regular offer and the food bank staff did not know if they would have this food supply week to week. This meant that fresh food could not be promoted as a core offer within the food bank outlet.

Foodbank Client Checklist

SERVICE NUMBER:	
Own Bags? Y or N	
Voucher Number	Date:
Is the Voucher valid – filled out correctly?	Y or N
Are they on the 3+ list?	Y or N
If Y what action taken?	

Cooking facilities (electricity/can opener etc)?	Y or N
Any dietary requirements, allergies etc:	
Halal vegetarian diabetic gluten free other:	
Children's Ages (if applicable)	
Would they like pasta or rice? (single person only)	
Would they like tea or coffee? (everyone)	
Do they need toiletries?	
Toilet roll/ shower gel/ shampoo/ toothpaste/ toothbrush/ soap	
Do they need nappies? If Yes what size?	
Other Information:	

Figure 14: Food parcel allocation form. (Photo by author).

EAST BRISTOL FOODBANK FOOD ALLOCATION FORM

Volunteer name:

Number of adults: | Number of children:

ITEM	1 Person	2 People	3-4 People	5+ People
Soup	2	2	4	6
Tomatoes/pasta sauce	2	2	4	6
Baked Beans	2	2	4	6
Vegetables	2	2	4	5
Meat/vegetarian meals	2	2	3	3
Potatoes	1	1	2	3
Fish	1	2	4	5
Pasta/ Rice (g)	500	1000	1500	2000
Pulses	1	1	2	2
Fruit	2	2	2	2
Rice Pudding/custard	2	2	2	2
Biscuits	1 small	1 Med	1 large	2 large
Cereal	1 small	1 Med	1 large	1 large
Tea bags/ Coffee	40/ 1 small	80/ 1 small	160/ 1 medium	160/ 1 large
Fruit Juice	1	1	1	1
Milk	1	1	2	3
Extra items				
Jam	1	1	1	1
Chocolate	1 small	1 medium	1 large	2 large
Snacks	1 packet	2 packets	4 packets	6 packets

Received – Signature

Figure 15: Other side of food parcel allocation form. (Photo by author).
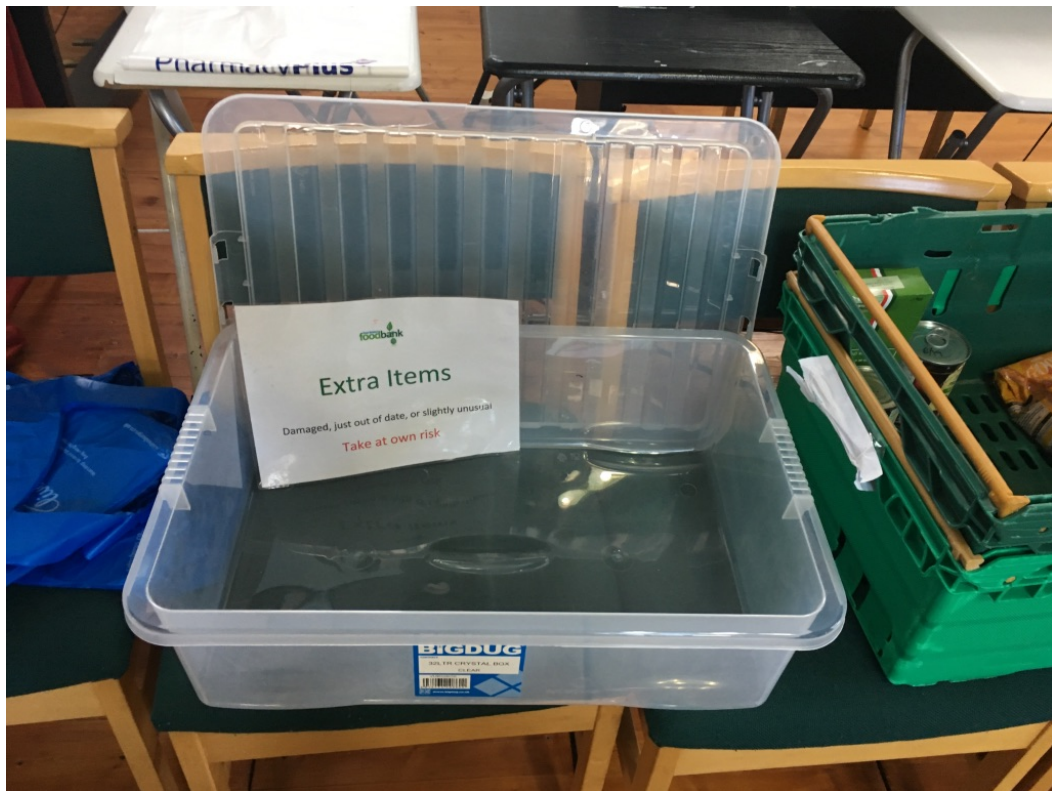
Figure 16: Help yourself' boxes at St Mark's food bank at the end of a session. (Photo by author).

Figure 17: Help Yourself' box at Tudor Road food bank. (Photo by author).

Figure 18: Donations of 'Veg on the Edge' and surplus onions from the community café. (Photo by author).

6.5.1 THE FOOD PARCEL OFFER

At every Trussell Trust Foodbank a food bank voucher will entitle a person or household to three days' worth of long-life tinned or dried 'emergency' food. In theory, the quantity of food varies depending on how many people the voucher is for, and at East Bristol Foodbank there is a set amount allocated for 1 person, 2 people, 3-4 people and 5+ people. In practice, the bigger the family, the more laborious going to the food bank becomes, because of the weight and bulk of the parcels – which are made up of predominantly tinned goods. The Trussell Trust designed the parcels in collaboration with nutritionists, and the categories of food distributed are the same across all Trussell Trust food banks, which means that a food parcel distributed in East Bristol will be more or less identical to a food parcel distributed in the North East of England, give or take brands and quality of goods donated. This makes the system simple for people to donate to, easy for the food bank to monitor supply, and to a certain extent, ensures people receive the nutrients they need – though recent studies challenge this notion, stating that food parcels contain

disproportionately high amounts of sugar and carbohydrate, and low levels of essential vitamins (Fallaize et al., 2020; Hughes & Prayago, 2018).

Ultimately, the quality, adequacy, and appropriateness of the food depends on donations made by the public. As I mentioned earlier, the Trussell Trust ask the public to donate certain items, which I discovered were foods primarily catering for a traditional Western/Eurocentric diet. What this means is that food parcels are not always appropriate for people from diverse cultural backgrounds who might not usually cook or eat these types of foods – who might not be able to read the English instructions on the tins, or who indeed, might only cook from scratch with fresh produce. This then creates barriers for people needing to access food support (Powers et al. 2017), because people are not able to access appropriate food that they want or need for their cultural background. It means that people who then *do* go to the food bank are given foods that they might not feel comfortable eating, or know how to use, which impacts on their health and wellbeing and may prevent them from accessing similar support in the future.

> *…a heavily pregnant Bangladeshi woman comes in accompanied by a caseworker from a local domestic abuse service. The woman speaks very little English, but on receipt of her food parcel, returns the tin of hot dogs that the volunteer forgot to take out of her Christmas bag (she is Muslim), and asks to swap a few other items for flour and oil. Unfortunately, the food bank doesn't provide these kinds of items – even though they are technically long-life products and a common request from service users. The caseworker intervened when she saw that her client was refusing a lot of the food in the parcel, and we managed to swap various items for additional rice, chopped tomatoes and chickpeas, which were items that she was more familiar with. Not equating to a balanced food parcel, the caseworker suggested that she look in the 'help yourself' boxes to the side of the room for anything that might be suitable, as her parcel now contained these three items and not much else. (Fieldnotes 23rd May 2018)*

Aside from beans and pulses, any culturally diverse foods that were available in the food bank were categorised as 'extras' and placed in the 'help yourself' boxes alongside food that was on the verge of expiring. However, if someone came into the food bank with a faith-based dietary requirement, such as halal – a common

occurrence as the food bank was situated in an area of high ethnic and cultural diversity, with a large Muslim population – they were given more portions of fish or veg rather than meat. Reflecting on this, the Foodbank Manager told me:

> *"...it's there as an add on, and ideally that should be mainstream...you want the whole community to benefit, you don't want just these sections to get it, cause you're not giving them what they would normally eat, and you can't really just use the example, 'well if they're really hungry they'll eat it', I mean, that would be the hard-line version - I don't think that would be fair really."*

Being part of the Trussell Trust network, I was told that to address this gap in food provision properly, the Trussell Trust would need to centrally adapt their food parcel categories. However, to a certain extent this could also be done at a local level and was not. I found that this was partly due to the food bank managers roles being predominantly reactive - they were often stretched for time and capacity and their roles were very much operational rather than strategic. This meant that they did not allocate sufficient time to talk to different community groups to find out what foods would be appropriate. As the Foodbank manager told me in an interview that "…if I had time and I had the right people to talk to, I would like to have more variety for people…", but time was never carved out to do so. This may have been influenced by the demographic makeup of the staff and volunteers at the food banks who were almost all white British, and perhaps did not consciously consider this as a key priority because the foods available were familiar to *them*; in addition, because the food bank was always busy, it may not have been as apparent that people in the community were in need but *not* accessing the food bank due to the type of food on offer. However, when pushed, the food bank staff were aware of the inadequacy of the food variety available.

> *"The foodbanks are not fully for everyone. Foodbanks aren't the first choice, but they're alright for now. It's a question of how far you go down that road – it's a lot to do just to get food here for now. If people want to swap the food they get here, they can swap."* – Food bank manager

There was a reservation to expand and improve the food offer, because it was felt to work against the food bank's position as an emergency 'crisis' intervention. For, if the parcels were improved by offering culturally diverse foods and/or fresh produce, it was believed that this would increase dependency and further embed food banks in the system because people would actually want to use them. This was an interesting position to take by the food bank, because expanding the diversity of foods available would have meant that a wider proportion of society, and the local community in particular, were catered for with foods that they want and need. By not expanding the food offer, despite being aware of the inadequacies, they recognised that the support provided was inappropriate for certain communities yet did not act to address this disparity in fear that this would make the food bank more 'appealing'. The need for this type of provision came to light starkly during the Covid-19 pandemic, when a local charity 'Black South West Network' coordinated a 'food hub' to specifically cater for people from diverse cultural backgrounds because people were not able to access food they needed and were uncomfortable eating food from the food banks in the city.

6.5.2 CHOICE

Similar to the lack of diversity in the food offer, the Trussell Trust model does not facilitate significant client choice in what they are given, aside from asking if they want 'tea or coffee', 'pasta or rice', and if they have specific dietary requirements. The food itself is kept in a separate room, out of sight from the food bank clients, and volunteers choose and pack food items on their behalf. Explaining why the East Bristol Foodbank works this way, the Assistant Manager told me that it is down to space, time and resource.

> *"Why can't people just go and choose their own things? Erm, to make sure that they do get a balanced kind of diet, or a balanced food parcel, and also to manage our stocks as well, and we just don't have the space! So, if you think at St Marks you've got… you know at 2 o'clock you've got five large families coming all at once, and you couldn't get them into that back room to all choose their own food - it would just take too long! Having the packing list means that it's balanced parcels, we know what we're low of and we can kind of ration that. So, if we're low on one thing we can*

give an alternative that's still the same kind of thing." – Assistant
Foodbank Manager

Regarding space, the food banks do not have enough permanent storage and movement space to organise food in a way that would enable people to choose food for themselves. Though the outlets have a permanent storeroom in each of the church buildings, these are small, and the larger rooms that are used to host the food bank sessions are only accessible at a specific time. Timing was also an issue, as the majority of people tend to arrive at the food bank during the first hour of the session. There is always a wait for food parcels during this period, and if people were allowed to choose their own food, it was felt that this would slow down this process even more. In addition, it was thought that certain resources would be more desirable than others, and it would unfairly favour those who arrive at the food bank first, and impact on stock control (Iafrati, 2016). The food parcel categories also ensure a nutritionally balanced food parcel (as much as this can be achieved through an emergency ambient food supply) and there was a mistrust in people's capacity to make good decisions about their nutrition.

It should be recognised that *within* these restrictions, clients are still offered the opportunity to 'swap' items they are given. Though it was noticeable that when people were new to the food bank, they were more likely to just take what they had been given and leave the food bank as quickly as possible. Talking about 'swapping' during interviews, participants told me that this was because they were embarrassed and did not want to appear ungrateful by refusing food.

"...when I first started going, I just took everything, even if I didn't like it! [laughs] I just started taking everything! I kept thinking I'd be offending them! [laughs] I kept thinking 'oh here I am, I really need this food, and there's me saying 'oh I don't want that!' and 'take that away!' you know?" – Ray, food bank client

"...food is food, and we can't be picky with what we're being given. If that's the only thing that they've got, and there's a lot of people, not just us that's going to the food bank, we should not be picky with what we're given for free. If we're given something for free, we should be grateful and not be picky with it." – Hana, food bank client

This latter quote came from an interview with Hana, a single mum who came to the food bank a few times during an acute period of crisis. Interviewing her in her home she showed me a whole shelf in her cupboard where she kept food from the food bank that she would not eat. Pointing at the different items in her cupboard she asked me:

> *"...can I be honest with you? The most I use is like the chopped tomatoes and this is the majority that I use [indicating tins in cupboard]. Chopped tomatoes, that, kidney beans, gravy...no...no...no...,beans - yes, cranberry juice - no, tuna - yes. And I just use this sometimes like, if I can't be arsed, and mashed potatoes I use. But....the pasta - yes. But they need to do what - sorry for the mess - they need to do what [another project] does and get fresh produce in."*

Fresh produce was commonly asked for, particularly when the 'Veg on the Edge' surplus was not available, however, it was always something that food banks said they did not have the capacity to offer because of the way in which they worked. Interestingly, as food banks have continued to cater for Bristol residents, and to expand due to rising need since the Covid-19 pandemic, some food banks in Bristol are now responding to this demand and developing this as part of their core food offer.

Interestingly, though Hana did not eat all the food she received from the food bank, she told me that she would use it to make meals for her friends and neighbours when they were experiencing hardship. And so, though she did not use the food bank in the most effective way to get food that *she* would eat, it enabled and empowered her to be able to feed friends and neighbours, and in doing so, care for others – using the food bank in a way that was not intended. The ways in which people use food aid is explored in more depth in Chapter 0.

Exercising choice and asking to 'swap' items were ways in which people could assert agency in the food bank. But it can also highlight a degree of comfort within the food bank that speaks to the normalisation of the food banking system:

Looking over at the 'help-yourself' section I see that a young British woman and her 9-year-old daughter are also rummaging in the help-yourself boxes. This is their fifth visit to the food bank within so many weeks, and the daughter, now familiar with the process, is picking up various items and putting them in her school backpack to take home. When their food parcel comes out, the little girl goes about taking items out that she doesn't like and asks me to get coco pops instead of corn flakes. Her mum laughs and says, "you're getting too big for your boots!" (Fieldnotes, 8th December 2017)

Importantly, the way in which the food was presented to the clients had an impact on the likelihood of them swapping items. For example, in St Mark's, the volunteers would bring the food parcels out to clients in green supermarket crates, allowing them to pack their own food bags themselves; while in Tudor Road, because of the narrow staircase, the volunteers had to pre-pack each of the parcels into bags. This may seem like a small detail to go into, but it had a noticeable impact. When the clients received their food in an open crate, they were able to clearly see the items they'd been given, take their time packing it in a way that best distributed the weight of the goods, and leave or swap items that they would not eat. In contrast, by giving the food parcels to people already pre-bagged, I found that food bank clients were far more likely to take a cursory look into the bag (if at all) and leave with what they had been given. In addition to the way that food is presented, the encounter between the volunteer and client also impacts the likelihood of swapping. When I started volunteering at the food bank, volunteers would not often reiterate that clients could exchange items when they gave them their food parcels. After a month or so of volunteering and asking volunteers questions about processes, during which we would often discuss the significance of swapping food items, it was noticeable that over time this practice changed, and volunteers would ensure that they reiterated to clients that they could swap items. By giving clients the opportunity to see what was in their parcel and feel assured that it was fine to swap items, the clients had more choice over what they received, which led to a better use of the food bank both in terms of reducing food waste and improving client experience.

6.5.3 CHOICE AND BEHAVIOUR

There were certain behavioural expectations – of both volunteers and clients – that were made visible when they were disrupted. For example, when people received their food parcels, they would commonly express gratitude, relief, and mild surprise at the quantity of food that they were given – a man once broke down and cried in front of me on receipt of his parcel, telling me that he couldn't believe how much food there was. Volunteers, in turn, sought to be kind and welcoming, offering a non-judgmental ear to those experiencing hardship. As the 'giver' of food, the volunteer would then be the recipient of the clients' in-kind exchange of gratitude and thanks. This was the expected (and to a certain extent, sought after) emotional exchange that took place, and played a significant role in reassuring clients that the food bank was a safe space as well as reassuring the volunteers that what they were doing was a valuable use of their time and effort.

However, this behavioural expectation is also steeped in an imbalance of power and the notion that food is a gift and not a right. This was made particularly clear when a woman arrived at the food bank as it was closing.

> *We were already halfway through packing away the food bank when an Eastern European woman in her mid to late thirties turned up with a food bank voucher. She'd gotten lost on her way to the Tudor Road food bank and a volunteer offered to make her up a parcel but told her that we would have to be out of the building in five minutes as we were closing. I helped the volunteer make up the food parcel and take it downstairs to the woman. The volunteer serving her hoped that she would take the food and leave us to lock up, but after looking in the bags there was a lot of food that she wouldn't eat. The volunteer who was serving her ended up going up and down the stairs to the storeroom three- or four-times swapping items for her while I tidied away the last remnants of the food bank. By the end of it, when she finally left, the volunteer turned around to me, exclaiming "I have never met someone so ungrateful in my life!". (Fieldnotes 9th May 2018)*

While I didn't envy the volunteer having to climb the rickety staircase four times in five minutes, I found their reaction striking because they made it clear to the client that they were doing them a favour by remaining open, and reminded me of the old

sayings, 'don't look a gift horse in the mouth' and 'beggars can't be choosers' – the latter a phrase that participants in this study often said about themselves, as exemplified in the quote below.

> "...my motto in life is 'beggars can't be choosers', so you know if you're given something, you do your best with what you can with it." – Leanne, food bank client

The volunteer's reaction reiterated the power imbalance between the volunteer as 'giver' and the client as 'receiver', and the food as a gift that should not be questioned – or in this circumstance 'swapped' or 'returned'. This was not to say that they could not swap or return items *at all*, but there was clearly a limit to this exchange that, once crossed, became perceived as 'ungrateful' and asking for 'too much'. Other situations that highlight this power imbalance were around the 'help yourself' boxes in the food bank.

> *Walking over to a couple who were looking through their food parcel, I asked if they wanted to exchange anything. "No, no, I don't think so – we're kind of blown away by what we've got!" the man replied. A moment later as I started to walk away, he calls after me, "oh, any milk?". I tell him that I'll go get some from the back, when an older volunteer who was lingering nearby interjects, "no, no we don't have any back there – we can't keep fresh milk". I thought this was a strange thing to say as we only stock long-life milk, which I go to offer him, giving the volunteer a quizzical look. "Yeah, that'd be great!" the man says. Though just at that moment, his partner pulls some out of the bag and says not to worry as they had already packed it. The older volunteer pulls me aside shortly after to tell me, "they took loads from the 'help yourself' box, so we can't give them anymore!". Confused as to why they're acting this way, I just say "okay", knowing that we think differently about it. (Fieldnotes 23rd March 2018)*

The help yourself boxes were difficult to get right. Put out at the beginning of the session, they were usually empty by the end, which meant that those who arrived at the food bank first would have more choice than a food bank client who arrived towards the end of the session. As these were classified as 'extras' there was almost no monitoring of the boxes to make it equitable across the session, this was mainly

because, lacking storage space, the food bank managers wanted to get rid of the food each week. The real problem arose when volunteers – one in particular – would monitor how much clients were taking and interject if they felt like clients had 'had enough'. This stemmed from anxiety around food supply, and the desire to ensure everyone had their fair share of the extras – displaying a show of protectiveness over the food. However, it was a problematic approach that on the handful of occasions that I witnessed it happen, had a negative impact on the experience of those clients, and disrupted the atmosphere of 'non-judgmental' support they tried to promote in the food bank.

6.6 MORE THAN FOOD (STAGE FIVE)

In addition to the food parcel, food banks offer support through the 'More than Food' programme, which was fully rolled-out in East Bristol Foodbank around the time that I started my fieldwork. Walking into the food bank you could see leaflets offering support with managing bills, obtaining white goods, access to the 'Eat Well Spend Less' cooking course, and signposting to debt advice services, strategically placed on every visible table or surface (Figure 19 & Figure 20.). The rollout of the programme worked alongside the relaxation of the 'three-voucher limit' and was developed out of the understanding that "ending hunger is about more than food" (The Trussell Trust, 2020d) – that meaningful support addresses the underlying causes of food insecurity at the same time as treating the symptoms. In trying to work more preventatively, the food banks assumed a much-needed support role that had been severely cut under austerity.

> *"I think the More Than Food stuff is more needed now because, as I said, the agencies that previously did that work with people have had funding cut, charities have folded, they've lost the tender and they can't do that kind of stuff...we shouldn't be picking up the pieces from the State, but where that's needed, we want to do as much as we possibly can with that. So, all the More Than Food stuff is trying to tackle those underlying things to get people out of that system, out of a place where you know they're just struggling on from day-to-day." – Assistant Foodbank Manager*

Replacing or supplementing these preventative services, the food banks have taken on responsibility for supporting those in hardship. As the Assistant Manager states, they are picking up the pieces from the state – a safety net for government agencies to fall back on - and often perceived as a kind of statutory service that is neither officially recognised nor paid for by government. This is why, out of principle, the East Bristol Foodbank managers do not accept more than three referrals per household from the Local Crisis and Prevention Team, nor the Jobcentre Plus, because they believed that these services have the means to support their clients out of crisis, but aren't, and the food bank managers did not want to enable further reliance on the VCSE sector.

The More Than Food programme has a small but significant impact on people's capacity to 'get by', as the Foodbank Manager explained:

> *"…it's a bit more than just giving people food...it's more than food [laughs]. So, you know, if someone can save £5 a week on their water costs, if someone can save £5 a week on their electricity costs, or by increasing, or getting warm home discounts, you know, we can get some people up by about £10 a week, which just helps. So, we're just trying to help people manage a bit better and come in a bit less."*

In many ways food banks work *within* the welfare system and are restricted by what is possible – for example through the More Than Food programme food banks are able to address drivers of food insecurity that are within the individual's control (e.g., managing bills, learning how to cook on a budget, or getting the right cooking equipment), but cannot address the wider systemic causes of this inequality and insecurity. This is where the central charity of the Trussell Trust is instrumental – in raising the profile of food insecurity and campaigning at a national level to reform welfare policies that compound experiences of hardship using the data that they collect from their franchises.

Figure 19: More than Food leaflet cover. (Photo by author).
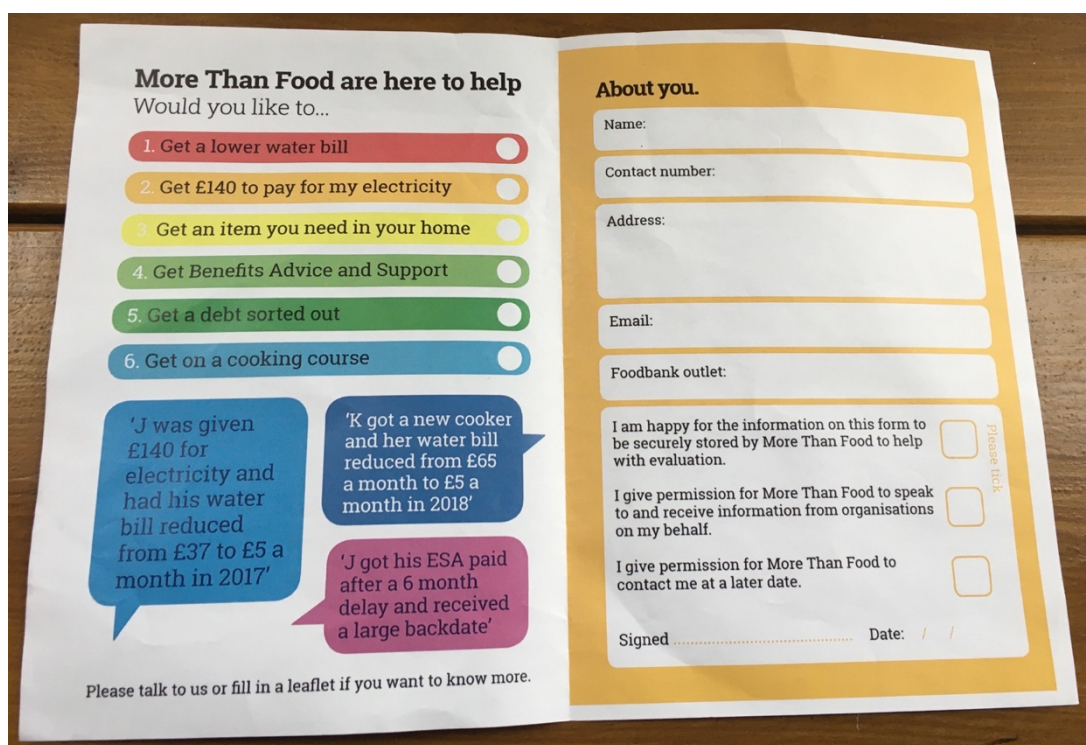
Figure 20: Inside the 'More than Food' leaflet. (Photo by author) [31].

6.6.1 A PLACE OF RADICALISATION AND CARE

Through studying the everyday of the food bank, including the work conducted through the More Than Food programme, it could be said that food banks support or teach people to 'get by' on less, and to become citizens who make 'responsible' decisions about resource management and nutrition. But food banks are complex sites – and 'the food bank' is not a static entity but is shaped by place, space and those who move within it. Offering 'more than food', food banks are primarily sites of care for distant others, from the donations of food anonymously to those struggling in the local community, to the actual experience of being there, where people can have a supportive conversation with someone who will not judge them over a cup of tea and a slice of cake.

Food banks are also semi-public spaces where, free to access if you have a voucher, you are not rushed to leave, and as a consequence people would sometimes hang out or linger in the food bank, taking the opportunity to charge phones, use the facilities,

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[31] This is a more recent More Than Food leaflet than was available during my fieldwork, and it should be noted that 'get benefits advice and support' was not listed on the original leaflet.

and stay warm and dry for a couple of hours – which was particularly appealing for those who were vulnerably housed. Sometimes they provided the only contact people would have with others that day, or week.

> *"I'm used to warmer weather having lived in [South Asia], so at home I'm always cold. I can't afford to pay the heating, so I just stay in bed all day. Coming here isn't just about getting food for me, it's also about getting out and having a chat like this - I've been chatting with you for half an hour! I don't really do anything, since I had the accident…" – food bank client*

In the food bank, acts of care were not always limited to what was provided through conversation, food, access to facilities and the 'More Than Food' initiatives, but also to small acts of generosity. On three occasions, I witnessed one of the volunteers give money to food bank clients. This was always done surreptitiously, in an almost 'under the table' type-manner, where she would clasp the client's hand in her own and, smiling at them, slip a ten-pound note into their hand while saying 'bless you' or something similar. I found it funny, because she made it seem like it was something underhand – but perhaps the secrecy was warranted, because it wasn't something that could be done for everyone and would probably have been frowned upon by the managers. Similarly, volunteers would sometimes go and buy essential items for people from the charity shop along the road. Often buying shoes, jackets and jumpers in the winter-time – warm clothes – that were for people who came to the food bank who were precariously housed or rough sleeping. Using cash donated by a local resident, the food bank manager sometimes even offered to top-up pre-payment meters for people – popping over to the Premier across the road with the clients' cards. These were always informal, discrete offers of support that were in reaction to individual experiences.

As Williams et al. (2016, p. 2296) state, "rules, practices and affective atmospheres – are performatively brought into being through the embodied interactions, and political and ethical proclivities of staff, volunteers and clients", and I found that while the East Bristol food bank outlets were sites of care, they were also sites of politicisation, which had less to do with the Trussell Trust system, and everything to do with the volunteers and clients themselves. For example, though the Trussell

Trust itself is an 'apolitical' organisation, many of the staff and volunteers I encountered openly discussed their frustration and anger at the policies employed by government and talked about the way in which volunteering had opened their eyes to the impact of welfare reform. Exploring this in a focus group with volunteers, I found that 'being there' was an important part of this for the volunteers.

Volunteer 1:...my politics didn't go leftwing at all, I kind of meandered down the Liberal Democrat line for most of my life until I came here. And I have shifted so far to the left in the last 18 months that I can hardly recognise myself. It's completely changed the way I look at it. And my wife is getting sick of it! [Laughter].

Volunteer 2: That's why I don't enter politics! [laughs]

Volunteer 3: So, to add to rewarding and privilege you could add life-changing?

Volunteer 1: Oh, absolutely, totally life-faith changing.

Volunteer 3: Changing your view on society and what's happening.

Volunteer 4: You're getting a real sense of the injustice.

Volunteer 1: Yeah.

Volunteer 5: The longer I've been here the more angry and frustrated I've become -

Volunteer 3: At the system.

Volunteer 5: ...when I first started volunteering for a food bank, yeah it was really rewarding, I really enjoyed doing it, and really felt it made a difference and I still get that. But the longer it goes on, the longer, the wider the food bank network seems to get to cope with the problem, and the more problems there seem to be! And the more frustrating it gets! And we have, to have someone like Ian Duncan Smith who, to be honest quite a lot of his policies did not work very well for poorer people! And yet when he was shown the poverty in his own constituency he was in tears. So, he genuinely cared about people, but he never meets the people. So, he didn't know what to do. And you want to say, can you not just come and meet some of the people that your policies are affecting? And do something that's actually gonna help them?

Listening to peoples' stories and being confronted with the realities of austerity played a key role in changing mind-sets, leading many to be more politically engaged. But encountering such precarity and hardship on a weekly basis could also

feel disempowering for people, which is where I found the role of faith key in preventing burnout.

6.6.2 THE ROLE OF PRAYER

> *I arrive slightly early for the Friday session at St Mark's. Walking through the community kitchen and into the church hall, I find the other volunteers sitting together at one of the tables…their heads are bent in towards one other and are in the middle of prayer. I sit down at the table while they pray - myself unreligious, I lower my gaze, feeling uncomfortable watching people as they pray and unconscious of my observation. As one of the volunteers asks for 'patience, and for everybody who comes to the food bank today to feel that a weight has been lifted from their shoulders', I wonder about the purpose of prayer – is it a way to feel prepared for what is to come, and to enable them to feel hopeful in the understanding that it is out of their control? (Fieldnotes 20th October 2017)*

At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed the role of religious institutions in supporting the supply and expansion of food banks, but in this study, I also found that faith plays an important role in driving and sustaining the staff and volunteers, as well as becoming an additional offer of care for food bank clients. As one of the only volunteers who was not a Christian, I was particularly interested in the role of faith in the food bank, and I noted that while the staff and volunteers openly discussed faith in God and religious duty as a key motivator to volunteering; their use of prayer was an important coping mechanism that helped to mentally and emotionally prepare for the food bank session ahead, helped them deal with crises, and enabled the staff and volunteers to wind down and alleviate their concern for the people they encountered that day.

In a focus group with the volunteers from St Marks, the conversation turned to the role of faith in the food bank and it was clear that, among myriad reasons, prayer became a form of self-care – an unburdening of responsibility, and a way in which volunteers could continue to care for others beyond the food bank.

> *"Volunteer 1: It generates prayer for me. You can't hear some of the stories we hear at the food bank and not pray for people. Not necessarily on the premises at the time, but umm, my prayers get inhabited by food bank people.*
>
> *Volunteer 3: ...I think my faith [pause]...my faith gives me somewhere to turn if I've had a difficult client, or a story that's really affected me. My faith gives me somewhere to go with that. I can kind of give that to God, leave that with him. Yeah, and be able to pray about the situation, kind of gives you more strength to keep going."*

The role of faith and prayer is particularly important when we consider the prevalence of volunteer burnout in the food aid sector (Denning, 2019). Like other frontline support services, demand on food banks has continued to increase and volunteers are witness to this seemingly unending precarity on a weekly basis. What I found interesting about the religious identity of the food bank was that faith and prayer can give the volunteers and staff hope and a feeling of agency - where they can 'pray for' people and 'pray on' issues that are particularly concerning for them. Essentially, they are able to pass responsibility to a higher power. This is not to say that these experiences do not stay with them, but rather, it enables the volunteer to continue to provide support in another way or form, which went some way to counter feelings of powerlessness.

The Foodbank Manager told me he sees God as the source of what they were doing, and that prayer plays a key role in this:

> *"...our faith is very important to us. For me, you know, I would say it's literally sometimes, I am praying in certain products and seeing them turn up. It's that kind of dynamic at times. It's been quite - you know, I love that side of it. So, so it's the source thing. You know, it's sort of you know, seeing God as the source of what we're doing, and the sustainer, and part of an organisation." –
> East Bristol Foodbank Manager*

But they were conscious of the criticism surrounding food banks – particularly in the US where food banks have been known to provide food contingent on participation in prayer – and were directly instructed by The Trussell Trust to ensure this never

happened. Careful to avoid such practices, prayer was only offered if a client requested it, and acted as an additional food bank offer providing clients with relief and comfort.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have examined the food bank through the everyday of two food bank outlets in East Bristol. Using the five stages of the food banking process to explore these community-based services, I find that the food bank can be understood as a site of multiplicity which has the potential for creating stigma, performing care, and of political transformation - findings which resonate with Cloke et al.'s (2017) earlier study of food banking in the UK. Such multiplicity is evident in the way that care is performed through practices of welcome and comfort – manifesting in the offer of tea and cake, a friendly ear and on occasion, supporting people through prayer. Of stigma, exposed by justifications of deservedness given by food bank clients upon arrival, and in expectations of gratitude by volunteers – revealed when this dynamic is disrupted. And of being a space of politicisation, in this case of the volunteers whose political views have shifted because of their encounters with food bank clients and the challenges they face, becoming more engaged in the impact of government policy on the everyday of getting by. But importantly, by exploring the minutia of the food bank and the ways in which this multiplicity is revealed in East-Central Bristol, I also contribute to knowledge by highlighting the ways in which the food itself – what is available, what is not available, how it is categorised, the way it is exchanged – can impact on service users experiences of the food bank. Pointing attention to the importance of critically engaging with the materiality of food; for what is offered in these sites, and how, has the capacity to create difference between bodies. Findings that resonate with the following chapters, which explore the everyday of the community kitchen and community food centre.

7. THE PLACE: BARTON HILL

The FoodCycle Community Kitchen was based in Barton Hill – an inner-east area of Bristol adjacent to Easton, which is bordered by main roads, railway tracks and the canal. Penned in by the city's infrastructure, Barton Hill is a predominantly residential area (though includes both an industrial and business park) and is consistently found to be one of the most deprived areas in the country[32] (see Figure 21). It falls within Lawrence Hill which, as one of the most disadvantaged wards in the city, has some of the highest rates of child poverty and health inequalities in Bristol. It is also one of the largest wards in the city in terms of population density (19,600 people) – reporting the highest rates of overcrowding in accommodation – and is the most ethnically diverse ward, with three-fifths (59.6%) of residents identifying as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (Bristol City Council, 2020).

Interestingly, the physical environment and demographic makeup of Barton Hill has significantly changed over the years due to cycles of regeneration and neglect. In particular, a regeneration project from the 1950s and 1960s had considerable impact on the local area, as during this time the council enforced compulsory purchase of houses deemed 'substandard' as part of a slum clearance, moving large numbers of Barton Hill residents into the far south of Bristol where a new housing development had been built[33]. Erecting council high rises in the place of these demolished terraced houses (see Figure 22), the local authority predominantly housed older people in the tower blocks as, at the time, they tended to place families in larger houses in the outer areas of Bristol. This meant that the residents living in the Barton Hill tower blocks were disproportionately older, which had a knock-on effect in the 1980s and 1990s when social housing stock was low – due to the impact of the right to buy scheme – and immigration into the country was high. During this time, the tower blocks in Barton Hill were some of the only available social housing stock in Bristol, which led to high numbers of people from ethnic minorities moving into the area, changing the demographic makeup of Barton Hill (Barton Hill Settlement, 2018). Subsequently, both the ethnic makeup and average age of residents has changed

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[32] This is according to Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs)
[33] Predominantly to Hartcliffe – which is now also one of the most disadvantaged areas in the city.

considerably in the past 30 years. In particular, there is now a large Somali community, as around the turn of the century, growing numbers of Somali families displaced due to civil war moved into the area, joining family members who were already settled in the locality. This, among other factors, has subsequently led to higher rates of overcrowding in council flats in Barton Hill – leading to areas of even higher population density.
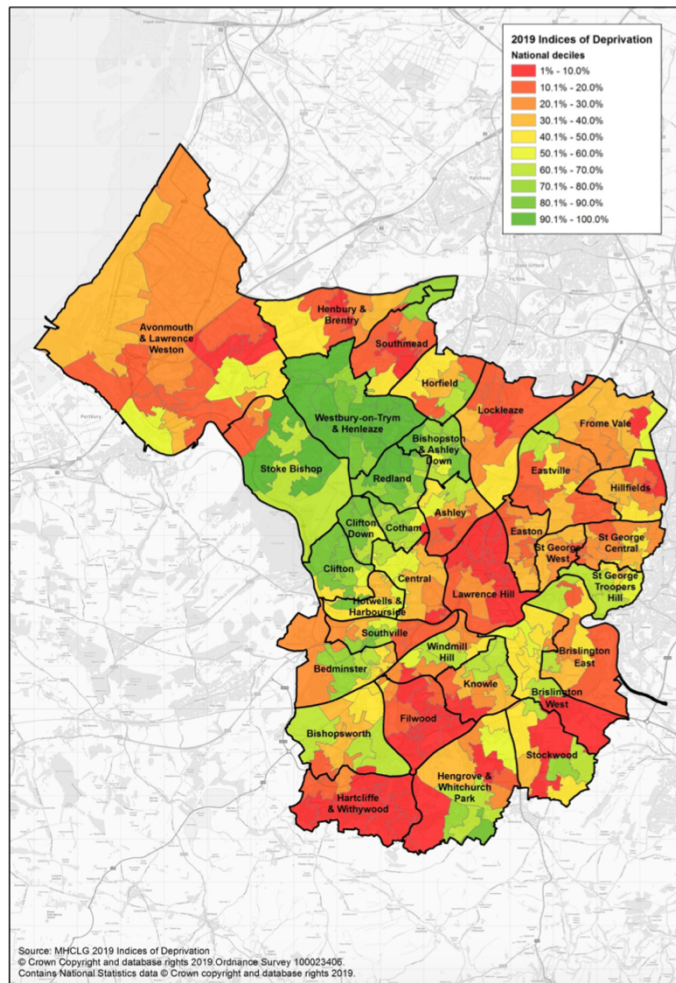
Figure 21: Bristol LSOAs. (Bristol City Council, 2019).

Figure 22: Barton Hill Tower Blocks. (Farell Roig, 2020).

Despite this 'regeneration' project, and a subsequent 10-year £50m investment from Labour's 'New Deal' funding, the area has continued to be disadvantaged. This is partly due to the impact of the regeneration work itself, but also due to the lack of consistent investment and longer-term infrastructural barriers, such as access to food, services and to the rest of the city (as although close to the city centre, Barton Hill is isolated by the city's infrastructure and poor transport routes), as well as issues of employment[34] and cultural and language barriers. These have all been compounded by the 2008-9 economic crisis, inflation and austerity cuts – which have led to many of the projects and community spaces opened during the previous government, to close (Cork, 2020).

In terms of food, within the area there are a few small corner shops, a convenience store, and a Lidl supermarket which offers a full range of items, though is the smallest premises in their chain, which means that the shop is often busy, and queues are long. Subsequently, for an area of high population density, there are insufficient food offers that are both affordable and provide access to fresh and nutritious food. In response to need, there are a few emergency food providers available if you know

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[34] Since covid-19 the Somali community in Barton Hill have been disproportionately economically affected because a high proportion of men are self-employed as taxi drivers.

where to go, either through lunch clubs or evening meals – often provided through Churches. But interestingly, despite being one of the most disadvantaged areas of Bristol, it does not have a local food bank, and people who are food insecure are directed to the East Bristol Foodbank in Easton, which is a 20-minute walk away – inevitably longer on the return journey, laden with heavy food bank items. There are also very few public spaces, such as pubs, bars, cafés and restaurants catering for the local area, and even fewer open and free community spaces. This means that access to food and to social space is limited in Barton Hill. However, it is important to note that those that do exist, are embedded, and provide valuable support and connection across communities.

7.1 THE COMMUNITY KITCHEN SITE

One such place is 'Barton Hill Settlement'[35] where the FoodCycle Community Kitchen was based. As a long-standing community hub, the Settlement is a charity that has been serving the Barton Hill area for over a century, in one form or another, and has been celebrated for their work tackling racism and violence between different communities and cultures in the area (Barton Hill Settlement, 2018; Voscur, 2020). Currently, the Settlement offers financial advice and family support services to disadvantaged residents in their locality, but they also have a café on-site in the main building, run a community development project called 'The Network', and hire out their community spaces to local groups and projects – such as FoodCycle, who use their main hall and kitchen space every Saturday. It is a community anchor[36], led by those from the local area and firmly embedded in the locality; as a result, it is well-known and well-loved by the various communities in Barton Hill. Built around a courtyard, the site is also host to a number of different public-facing charities, many of which provide specialist support for people from diverse backgrounds, such

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[35] In 2020, Barton Hill Settlement merged with the Wellspring Healthy Living Centre and is now part of the Wellspring Settlement. The Wellspring Centre was initially established out of the new deal funding in 2004 and works to address health inequalities in the local area.

[36] "Community anchors are independent community-led organisations. They are multi-purpose and provide holistic solutions to local problems and challenges, bringing out the best in people and agencies. They are there for the long term, not just the quick fix. Community anchors are often the driving force in community renewal." (CLES, 2009: 6)

as the Bristol Somali Resource Centre. Consequently, the Settlement has a high profile in Barton Hill and is a gathering space of interconnection for the area.

As you enter the Settlement courtyard, the FoodCycle Community Kitchen is found directly in front of you to the right, operating out of the community hall. On the far left of the courtyard is the main building where the reception, café, and nursery are found, and in between, are the buildings rented out on longer-term lease to smaller charities. Operating the community kitchen on a Saturday meant that these charities were always closed and there was very little activity in the Settlement outside of the hall except for a coding club for children and young people. In the middle of the courtyard there are tables and chairs scattered on the grass, a large tree that provides shade, and a couple of benches that line the side of the buildings, interspersed with places for people to lock their bikes up (see Figure 23). The hall itself is fairly large and there's an industrial kitchen attached to the hall, which makes it a useful and well-used space for community groups. There is also a breakout area, where there are a number of comfortable armchairs in a small annexe off from the main hall, and a storage room for community groups to keep equipment. Through a set of double doors at the far side of the hall are toilet facilities, a staircase leading to offices upstairs, and another set of doors that provide a side entrance to the Settlement. Importantly for context, the hall is used every day of the week by a variety of different groups and, like the rest of the Settlement, is dated – subject to underinvestment in social and community support services. The paint on the walls peels in places (some areas haven't even had a skim over the plasterboard), it has a leaky roof, unreliable cooker, and the toilets are often out of order. In addition, the storeroom, used by so many different groups is usually messy and equipment often goes missing. But despite being run-down, the space is well-known, can comfortably seat 50 people for a meal (see Figure 24), and (except for a couple of weeks in the winter when the heating system broke) was a warm and dry space for people to come together.

Figure 23: Barton Hill Settlement courtyard. The main building ahead, the community hall behind photographer. (Photo by author).

Figure 24: The main hall and kitchen at Barton Hill Settlement, set up for the community kitchen. (Photo by author).

8. The Community Kitchen

In this chapter, I explore the everyday of the community kitchen. I examine how it operates, what it provides, and crucially, what happens within the space. Focusing on the encounters between volunteers – namely, 'hosts' who are volunteers who serve the food – and 'guests', which is the term used to describe those who come to eat at the community kitchen, I highlight power dynamics at play through the negotiation of movement and agency within the space. I begin by exploring 'FoodCycle', outlining who they are and how they operate; I follow by examining how FoodCycle works in Bristol; and proceed to explore three points, or spaces of encounter that have the potential to make sameness and difference between the volunteers and guests – the help yourself table, eating together, and acts of reciprocity.

8.1 Community kitchens and FoodCycle

Community kitchens can vary greatly in how they operate but are loosely defined as community-based cooking initiatives where people come together to plan, cook and share food (Tarasuk & Reynolds, 1999). They are often used as ways to learn about different cultural foods, to develop cooking skills, or to promote the consumption of fresh and nutritious produce; and for low-income households, can also be used to help subsidise the cost of food. Crucially, community kitchens are not formalised cooking classes, nor are they soup kitchens, but are spaces where people can cook, share, and eat food communally. 'Social eating initiatives' are similar to the community kitchen model, but focus more on the significance of commensality, and are places that provide low-cost communal meals using surplus food[37], with the aim of promoting social inclusion through the provision of affordable and healthy food served communally (Smith & Harvey, 2021). So, where the community kitchen is focused more on the production of the meal, social eating initiatives are more focused on the sharing of the meal itself. The food aid project that I explore in this chapter is run by a charity called 'FoodCycle' and can be thought of as a combination of both a social eating initiative and community kitchen (though is referred to as a 'community kitchen'). This is because FoodCycle community

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[37] The ingredients used by such places is usually sourced for free, or for a significantly subsidised rate through redistribution charities like FareShare.

kitchens bring people together to plan, cook and share food using surplus from shops and supermarkets, but also use this food to provide a meal for a wider group of people to eat communally.

Inspired by the US project 'Campus Kitchens'[38], FoodCycle was founded in 2009 by a group of university students, on the belief that food waste and food poverty should not co-exist (Hawkes, 2014). Since then, FoodCycle have expanded and they are now a national charity running a network of over 30 community kitchens across England (interchangeably known as 'hubs' or 'projects'). Their vision is to "make food poverty, loneliness and food waste a thing of the past for every community" (FoodCycle, 2021) and work towards this vision by bringing people together (the 'volunteers') once a week to create a three-course meal from food surplus, which is then shared with people who are experiencing food insecurity and social isolation (the 'guests').

Since the introduction of austerity, FoodCycle community kitchens have expanded quickly across the country utilising the 'triple-donation model' used by other organisations like the Trussell Trust – where food, time and space are donated. The community kitchens are run locally by voluntary 'Project Leaders', who are supported by other volunteers who give their time to help collect, cook and serve the food; they use surplus food donated by shops and supermarkets that would otherwise have gone to landfill; and they use kitchen and dining spaces that are donated for free by local organisations[39], which are often situated in community-facing buildings. To make their meals accessible to people who are likely to experience food insecurity and social isolation, the kitchens are usually situated in disadvantaged areas, do not means-test nor have a referral system, and they do not charge for the food. This is an important distinction between this community kitchen model and the aforementioned 'social eating initiative', because by providing food for free, it has an impact on how the project operates and how it is perceived, which I explore later in this chapter.

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[38] A project where students use on-campus kitchen space and donated surplus cafeteria food to produce meals for their surrounding communities.
[39] In some locations FoodCycle pay a nominal fee to hire the space, but in Bristol they hire the space for free.

Structurally, 'FoodCycle' is a central charity run by paid members of staff who coordinate, train and support the network of 'community kitchens' run by volunteers across the country. Because the core charity is based in London, and the community kitchens are geographically disparate, FoodCycle employ Regional Managers to work remotely to support the Project Leaders, and to help establish new community kitchens. While there is a certain level of autonomy within each community kitchen – as Project Leaders are seen to operationally 'run' the community kitchens at a local level – the projects are not franchises, and as such, Project Leaders report to the Regional Managers who oversee the projects and escalate any issues, requests, or concerns to the central charity's management team. Each community kitchen is also provided with basic infrastructure and resources to help Project Leaders with the on-the-ground running of the project, such as safeguarding and food hygiene training, access to an online communications platform, use of an internal database, and branded materials to promote the meals in their local areas.

Within the projects, there is another operational structure at play, as the community kitchens have three volunteer teams who coordinate the weekly meals, each of which are led by the voluntary Project Leaders. The 'collection team' pick up the surplus food from shops and supermarkets and drop it off at the community kitchen site; the 'cooking team' sort, prepare and cook the food, creating the three-course meal; and the 'hosting team' set up the dining area, welcome guests into the space, serve the food, and clear up afterwards. In FoodCycle, those who participate in collecting, cooking and serving food are termed 'volunteers', while those who come to eat the meal but do not partake in its preparation, are referred to as 'guests'. In theory, anyone can sign up to volunteer, or come along to eat as a guest – though there were few instances over the year where these roles were blurred. Something that I discuss later in this chapter.

Emphasising the importance of place-based studies of food aid, in the following sections I explore how these centralised processes play out in the Bristol context.

8.2 THE BRISTOL PROJECT

To begin, it is important to give context to how the community kitchen works in Bristol and who is involved; and in this section I explore who the guests and who the volunteers are, and talk through how the collection, cooking and hosting teams work. It is important to mention at this point that shortly before I started this fieldwork, FoodCycle went through a transitionary period where they made a number of changes to the way their community kitchens were run and managed. According to the Regional Manager and Project Leaders, this was in order to improve health and safety processes and focus more on improving the 'guest experience'. This included the introduction of aforementioned Regional Managers, the formalisation of various health and safety and safeguarding processes, and the introduction of the Hosting Team, which were new structures and processes that had a significant impact on the autonomy of Project Leaders to make decisions about how the community kitchens were run. Prior to the introduction of Regional Managers, the central charity was less involved with the day-to-day of the community kitchens. This meant that Project Leaders held more responsibility and were more heavily involved on a week-by-week basis. While the introduction of Regional Managers relieved pressure placed on volunteers, not everyone involved with the Bristol project were comfortable with the perceived 'professionalisation' of processes implemented, and there were noticeable tensions between old and new ways of working (which I explore later in this chapter). Having been operating since 2010, they were one of the longest-standing community kitchens in the network outside of London, and the new processes could be disruptive. Indeed, when I started this fieldwork, I was told that a number of long-standing volunteers had actually recently left the kitchen to start up another food project because of differences in management styles and visions for how community meals should operate. This meant that only a few of the longer-standing Project Leaders were still involved in the community kitchen, and during the year that I conducted this research the Bristol project was going through a period of adjustment.

8.2.1 VOLUNTEERS AND GUESTS

The community kitchen took place on a Saturday and the vast majority of guests attended the meal on a regular basis. Reflecting the profile of food insecurity as

outlined in the literature review, guests were predominantly single men and usually between the age of 30 and 60. As time went on, I noticed more women attending – even some with young children – and by the time I finished my data collection there were approximately 5 or 6 women who regularly participated. However, there was still a significant disparity compared to the 20-30 men who would come along each week. While some guests came to the project primarily for the social aspect of the meal, the majority of guests were financially precarious and came because of the access to food. Chatting to guests informally over the year, and in more depth through interviews, I found that many of them were experiencing food insecurity in amongst other pressures of poverty; some guests were homeless or vulnerably housed; many lived alone; and almost everyone was living on a very low income. Interestingly, despite the kitchen being based in an area of high ethnic diversity, there were very few people of colour who attended the meal, and the majority of guests were white British or white European. In addition to this, probably about half of the guests did not live in the nearby area but travelled to the Settlement in order to attend the meal because it was one of the few free projects open and serving food on a Saturday.

In comparison, the volunteers were predominantly made up of young (though also white) middle-class students and young professionals who lived in other parts of the city, were interested in environmental and social justice, and wanted an opportunity to 'give back' to society in some way. Significantly, FoodCycle provided an easy way for people to volunteer supporting a social and environmental cause without having to regularly commit to a project. For example, the Project Leaders only had to volunteer once a month, and the other volunteers only signed up for individual sessions, with no obligation to come back again. Because of this flexibility around volunteering, and the appeal of the kinds of activities on offer (cycling, cooking and chatting), volunteer slots were constantly booked up. And while this was positive for the sustainability of the project, because it meant that there were enough volunteers to run the kitchen, it did mean that people who wanted to volunteer again often had to wait for a number of weeks before they could do so.

This had an impact on the atmosphere of the project, because aside from a few Project Leaders, the majority of the volunteer teams were made up of new volunteers

who did not know each other, which meant the volunteer community was constantly being redefined each week, with very little continuity for those who came on a long-term basis as a guest. This was not helped by the fact that there was little crossover between the guests and volunteers. In fact, on only two occasions did I witness someone who came as a guest sign up to volunteer – and in both instances, they did not do so again. These factors contributed to the duality of the project – as it worked as a 'community kitchen' for those volunteering, and a 'social eating initiative' for those who were guests – and compounded the feeling that the project played host to two different communities.

Part of the reason for this was down to how the Bristol project advertised the meal, they primarily advertised via social media, and did not actively disseminate posters and flyers, which would have limited who came across the project. Indeed, the majority of guests heard about it through word of mouth, and the majority of volunteers heard about the project via social media, or through active searching for volunteering opportunities. Another reason for the distinction was due to how people signed up to volunteer, as people could not just turn up to volunteer on the day, they needed to sign up online. It was a formalised process that required participating in an online food safety test before being able to sign up for sessions. This would have been a barrier for some guests who have limited access to the internet or had poor computer literacy. Indeed, the popularity of volunteering meant that it could also be inaccessible, as slots would be booked up for weeks on end by students and young professionals. This, among other issues that I discuss later in this chapter – such as the control of space and movement in the project – compounded the feeling that the community kitchen played host to two different communities. Interestingly, in an earlier study of the community kitchen Phillips and Willatt (2019) found that the guests' and volunteer's roles were not fixed and that there was cross-over between the two groups. A contrast that highlights the changing nature of voluntary sector organisations – where small changes over time can impact on the culture or identity of a project.

Significantly, the Project Leaders and volunteers were not local residents, nor were they often people who worked for organisations or charities in the locality. This meant that the majority of volunteers travelled to the project from other parts of the

city, and it was common to hear volunteers remark at never having been through Barton Hill before – or of getting lost on the way there. Compounded by the fact that many guests themselves travelled into the area for the meal, the community kitchen did not feel like it was grounded in the locality of Barton Hill. Indeed, one of the main reasons it moved to Barton Hill in the first place was because Easton Community Centre had started charging for their use of the space, and the Settlement could offer the hall for free. There was little attachment to the site itself other than its convenience, which was compounded by the fact that the project operated on a Saturday, when all the other charities and organisations at the Settlement were closed, and there were very few organic opportunities for interaction with other groups that might have been able to embed the project into the community more.

Because of these factors, the 'community' (or rather communit*ies*) brought together through the community kitchen, were not geographically bound outside of that space. This wasn't necessarily a problem, because the project was called 'FoodCycle *Bristol* Community Kitchen' – not the Barton Hill community kitchen. But it is an interesting dynamic to consider when reflecting on the purpose of Barton Hill Settlement, which is designed to serve the residents of Barton Hill. No other group could use this space on a Saturday while the meal was on, and as a valuable community asset, the fact that the community kitchen used the space for free and did not necessarily cater for Barton Hill residents – at least not to the extent that they could have – meant that this community asset might not have been used in the most beneficial way by FoodCycle. This highlights an important issue about responsibility and ownership with food aid provision, where it is common to find 'community-based' food aid projects delivered by people from middle-class and usually white backgrounds who do not live in those communities. There are various reasons for this phenomenon – for example, those who are financially secure and not time-poor are more likely to have the time and means to give to volunteer work – however, when communities are not represented in the groups supporting them, it does create possibilities, and leave them vulnerable to accusations, of 'doing to' communities, rather than 'doing with'.

8.2.2 THE COLLECTION

Unlike other FoodCycle community kitchens, the Bristol project collect food by bicycle and trailer in order to reduce their carbon footprint. Driven by strong environmental values, they also avoid collecting food from large supermarkets, because of the role supermarkets are perceived to have in creating and perpetuating inequality and precarity for producers and workers, as well as unsustainable environmental practices across the food system. Instead of collecting food primarily from corporate supermarkets like other FoodCycle projects, the Bristol team collect from local shops in Central and East-Central Bristol.

Starting the day at 10am, the cycling team meet in St Paul's, where the trailers are stored free of charge in the local Learning Centre's outbuilding. Starting their collection with the Co-op on Gloucester Road (the only mainstream supermarket they collect from), they work their way back down the hill and across Easton towards Barton Hill, stopping at sites they have established partnerships with. At every stop, they do a quick check to ensure that the food is edible, and then store the food in their trailers (see Figure 25). This is a particularly important practice because in the past, cycling Project Leaders have felt that shops have been careless with the food donation – using it as an opportunity to get rid of food that should have gone to landfill. There was even an incident in the past where upon unpacking a large bag of fresh produce, the cycling team found an open bottle of bleach at the bottom and had to get rid of the entire trailer's collection.

> *"Some of the shops give us some not very good food, they use us as*
> *a rubbish bin. But a lot of it is very good - very fresh." – Bristol*
> *Project Leader*

Because the project collect food from smaller businesses and try to keep as much of the collection in the nearby area, they work with a number of shops that stock a wide variety of culturally diverse fruit and vegetables. This was actually a talking point in the project, as many volunteers and guests did not recognise or know how to cook items of produce collected, which would mean that they were often left out of the

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meal itself and allocated to the 'help yourself' table. Sometimes a volunteer would also post pictures of said produce on social media asking people to 'identify the food' as a way of publicising the meal – a practice which always left me feeling uncomfortably aware of the lack of diversity in the project compared to the locality it was situated in. Often these items were left out of the meal because the cooking team were unsure as to how to prepare and cook them or did not know an appropriate recipe. Which left me thinking that if there had been volunteers who represented the diversity of the locality present, and the diversity of the customers these shops catered for, there might have been opportunity for other volunteers to learn how to cook vegetables unfamiliar to them, and no doubt would have diversified the cuisine provided in the project, which may have had the potential to increase the diversity of guests who came to the meal.

Each trailer can store approximately 20kg of food, so depending on the amount the shops have available, the cycling team may do more than one round of drop-offs to the kitchen (see Figure 26), and in total, the collection can take between 2-3 hours to complete. Aside from the collection on a Saturday, the Bristol project also have a Monday collection, where members of the cycling team pick up surplus food from the same collection sites and distribute the food to local refugee and asylum seeker charities and support services in Easton. However, since the second Covid-19 lockdown, these collections have been redirected to a second FoodCycle project that has opened in St Jude's, an area of inner-east Bristol that also falls within the Lawrence Hill ward and is located across St Philips Causeway from Easton.

Figure 25: The Cycling team checking and packing the food into trailers. (Photo by FoodCycle Project Leader).

Figure 26: The Bristol Cycling team at work. (Photo by FoodCycle Project Leader).

Figure 27: Example of the surplus food the Cycling team pick up. (Photo by FoodCycle Project Leader).

8.2.3 THE COOK

The cooking team arrive at the Settlement between 11 and 11.30am, around the same time that the cycling team start to drop off the collection. Sorting through the surplus food, the cooking team collectively work out what they can make for each of the three courses with the ingredients donated 'Ready, Steady, Cook!' style[40], and divide up tasks between the volunteers who prepare the meal standing together around the island in the middle of the kitchen (see Figure 28). While the majority of the meal is prepared using the collection of surplus produce, the cooking team also keep grains, herbs, spices and oils to supplement the meals in a dry store in the shared cupboard at the back of the hall (see Figure 29). As a general rule, the cooking team try to

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[40] This is a reference to a popular tv-show where celebrity chefs would be challenged to make a meal with a bag of randomly assorted ingredients.

make enough food to serve approximately 50 people for each course, which includes about 35 guests and around 10 volunteers with a bit extra, just in case there are more guests than usual. Because the project is a drop-in service, it is often difficult to gauge how many people will come to eat, and during my fieldwork I witnessed as few as 17 and as many as 48 guests turn up to a meal.

The cook was always a bit stressful, particularly at the beginning of the session, as the kitchen is fairly run down. Equipment would often need to be washed prior to use, and the cooker itself was a main source of frustration as more often than not, a volunteer would be on the floor with a lighter trying to manually ignite the pilot light. As a community space, the kitchen and equipment were used by a number of different community groups, which meant that there was generally a lack of ownership of the space. Every group was required to clean up after themselves, but some were less vigilant than others, which had a compounding effect over time, and equipment, like the cooker, was left to fall into disrepair.

As a rule, meals produced in FoodCycle community kitchens do not include fish or meat. Organisationally this is to ensure that meals are inclusive to people from all cultures and religions, but it is also due to the risks involved in handling surplus food, and by avoiding these high-risk food items, FoodCycle avoid the swathes of health and logistical requirements that are involved in handling surplus meat and fish. Interestingly, in the Bristol project, the food was also usually vegan, which was a decision driven by both practical and ethical reasons. Practically, the food collection did not offer much choice, as sourcing food from smaller shops and supermarkets – particularly greengrocers – meant that the cycling team were less likely to receive animal-based products. While ethically, a number of the volunteers who worked in the kitchen were vegans, and because one of the key principles of the community kitchen is to share food, all dietary requirements needed to be taken into consideration when preparing the meal.

The tastes, creativity and diets of the volunteers played an important role in the food produced. Excluding dairy and eggs from the meal was an example of this, and was an interesting decision considering the prevalence of food insecurity amongst the guests – when maintaining a nutritionally balanced diet can be more difficult.

Another way to approach this could have been to offer a vegan option rather than making this the only choice. When people experience food insecurity, they often also experience nutritional deficiency, and animal-based products would have been an easy source of protein. But this is where the skill and creativity of the cooking team is important. For example, one particular vegan cooking Project Leader was incredibly creative with the food they made and was careful to ensure that the meals included sufficient plant-based protein (see Figure 30 and Figure 31), as you can see from the following fieldnote extract.

> *We ate salad with pomegranate and spicy rice wrapped in cabbage for starters; for the main we had veggie bean burgers with chips and salsa and some parsley on the side for decoration; and apple pie with banana custard for dessert. People seemed to really enjoy the food this week and many people came up for seconds. One man wouldn't eat the spicy rice because there's a problem with 'spice'[41] in the community and although we said it wasn't the same kind of spice, he just asked for salad instead. (Fieldnotes 25th November 2017)*

The skill and knowledge of cooking volunteers had significant impact on not only the nutritional value of the food, but the diversity of the foods used in the meal, the types of dishes created, and importantly, the *enjoyment* of the meal.

> *"Obviously it depends on who's cooking and what their knowledge is, and experience… we do create some really cool things. Like last week with the avocado and chocolate mousse - [it] was amazing! So yeah, it depends on what volunteers you have, and how brave they are I suppose to be creative with different things." – Hosting Project Leader*

Sadly, such creativity could not always be relied upon, as the cooks were volunteers with a range of knowledge and cooking experience. This was particularly problematic when the cooks tried to create vegan dishes but were not vegans themselves and had little experience of creating wholesome vegan meals.

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[41] The 'spice' the guest was referring to here is a form of synthetic cannabis.

Today at FoodCycle it was a really humid day and only 18 ppl show up for the starter. No compliments re the food like usual, but no one complained – it was some sort of vegetable soup and really didn't taste of much. (Fieldnotes 26th May 2018)

I can recall one particular Saturday where things went from bad to worse when the cooks served up salad for starter, salad and chips for the main, and fruit salad for dessert. We got a lot of complaints that day.

Interestingly, dessert was often an outlier. While FoodCycle seeks to reduce food waste by transforming surplus food into a community meal, the cooks did sometimes have to buy certain items to bulk out the food if there wasn't enough. Often this involved purchasing tins of chopped tomatoes or pulses (alongside the standard dairy and non-dairy milk for the teas and coffees). But when the cooking lead in the kitchen was not a vegan, I noticed that they would use this trip to Lidl, at the end of the road, as an opportunity to go and buy butter and eggs to make some sort of cake or crumble for pudding (see Figure 32), which was always particularly well received by the guests, who were not vegan.

On the whole, the food was well received (apart from the salad incident), and guests were genuinely impressed by some of the meals that were made just from vegetables and fruit. As participants stated:

"The food is amazing, the fruit and vegetables. They do a lot with just vegetables…I know that at least once a week I have vegetarian. Regardless of whatever I eat throughout the week, that diet is vegetarian. Good excuse to get some vegetables in" – Pedro, community kitchen guest

"It's quite interesting. Sometimes when I come now, I think, see if I could eat stuff like this then I could probably manage being a vegetarian." – George, community kitchen guest

Placing a bowl of minestrone soup in front of a guest, he smiles and exclaims, "wow it's so colourful, it's really nice." (Fieldnotes 20th January 2018)

While the tastes, skills and knowledge within the cooking team determined the food that guests would eat, the cooking team were always receptive to feedback from the guests about the food, as they were concerned about wanting to ensure that people enjoyed the meal, which resonates with the host and guest dynamic created within the project. However, due to the precarious nature of where the food was sourced and the high turnover of volunteers, there were few opportunities to take requests from guests as to what they would like to eat. For if someone asked for a certain meal, the volunteer who took the request might not be cooking the following week, nor might the ingredients be available through the collection. While this was an understandable reality, the project could have approached this differently, asked the guests what meals they liked to eat and use this as a platform for the cooking team when assessing what can be made from the collection. This way, dishes would be shaped to meet their tastes, and the guests, who would rarely volunteer, would be more involved in the decision-making processes.

Figure 28: Cooking Team volunteers at work. (Photo by Author).
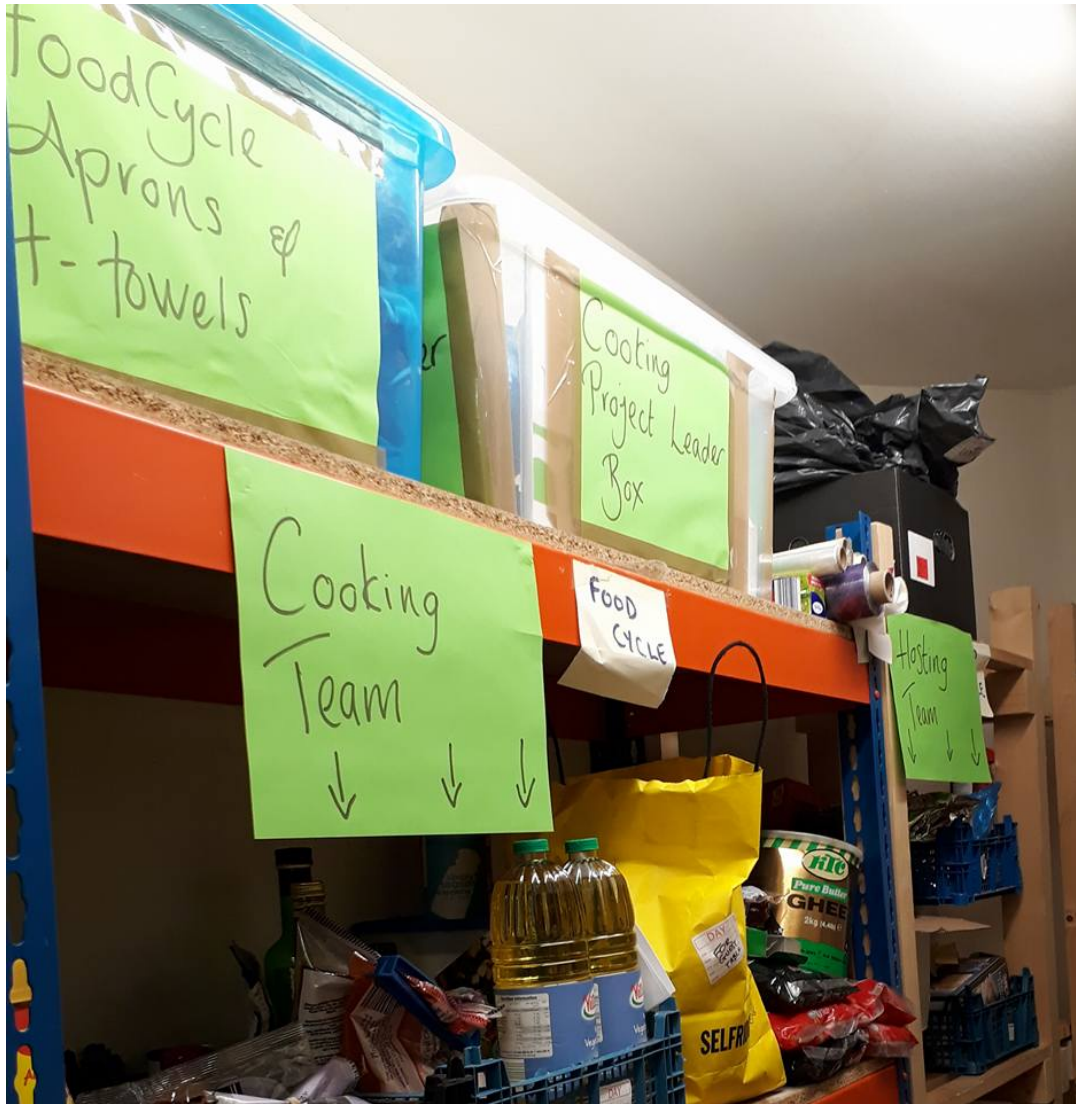
Figure 29: Example of dry store goods. (Photo by Author).

Figure 30: Vegan stew in progress. (Photo by Author).

Figure 31: A particularly well-presented starter. (Photo by Author).

Figure 32: (Non-vegan) banana cake. (Photo by author).

8.2.4 The hosting

As the last to arrive at the project, the hosting team get to the Settlement between 1 and 1.30pm – about an hour before the meal begins at 2.30pm. Their first job is to set up the room ready for the guests to arrive, which includes laying the tables, setting

up the tea and coffee stand, putting out signs and signposting material – including the menu (see Figure 33), along with board games and paper and crayons for any children that might come. Just before the doors open for the guests at 2.15pm, the hosts sort through any excess surplus food from the meal and move this over to the 'help yourself table' ready for the guests to take before the first course is served. And as there are usually a few people who arrive early for the meal, the hosts make them a cup of tea or coffee while they wait outside under the shelter. Once the doors open, hosts welcome the guests into the space and when the meal is ready, serve the food to the guests at their tables (see Figure 34), sitting down to eat with them once everyone has been served (as do the cooks most of the time). Finally, they clear away the plates at the end of each course and pack away the hall at the end of the meal.

At this stage, it is important to acknowledge that FoodCycle use the term 'guest' instead of 'service user' or 'client' in order to elicit a dynamic of welcome in their community kitchens. By using this term, they emphasise the relational experience of the meal and attempt to subvert the association with being a 'service' by employing the term 'host' for certain volunteers – terminology that is more often associated with home cooking, or a meal out in a restaurant. But significantly, the terms 'host' and 'guest' are culturally loaded, and there are expectations of behaviour, codes of conduct and status associated with these roles. Most notably, there is power involved in having a position to 'give' hospitality, and there is an expectation of appreciation from the guest who 'received' hospitality – dynamics that highlight difference. Indeed, by creating the hosting role and focusing on the 'guest experience', distinctions between the volunteers and guests are compounded as FoodCycle have created a situation in which people are being welcomed into a space that is not shared equally – for the hosts control where guests can move within the space, when guests eat, and who eats first. As you can see from this fieldnote extract where control over distribution of food, often done in the pursuit of equitable distribution, actually produced symbolic moments of 'withholding' and 'giving' of food:

> *I had an awkward exchange with one of the guests today. I was*
> *going around offering out bread rolls to have with the soup. I had*
> *only served half the room when a man got frustrated when I asked*
> *him to only take one. There weren't many and I wanted to make*

sure everyone got one. He was clearly offended by my saying 'no', even though I'd actually said, "do you mind if I come back to you once everyone has one?" He refused the rolls point blank and didn't even take one. (Fieldnotes 5ᵗʰ May 2018)

Furthermore, though many of the decisions made by volunteers and the charity evoked a feeling of welcome, it could be said that there was a level of mistrust in the guests that informed decision-making, which compounded the feelings of two distinct positions. For example, on the tea and coffee stand, the sugar, milk and coffee were decanted into pots and jugs to avoid people stealing them – a response to coffee going missing a couple of times. This did not go unnoticed by the guests.

*One of the guests called me over to ask if we have soy milk for the tea and coffee. It had been placed on the kitchen counter, so I reached across and got it for him. After he used it, he asked where the lid was – I told him that it was probably put in the kitchen somewhere – to which he looked at me frowning and asks, in a slightly accusatory tone, if we think they're doing to steal it…
(Fieldnotes 10ᵗʰ February 2018)*

In addition, the regional manager insisted on no pint or wine glasses on the tables, to avoid the association with alcohol – despite there being a shortage of glasses which led to using mugs for water; the store cupboard and back door were locked to control travel within the space, and avoid theft during the meal; and, most importantly, there was a project agreement (see Figure 35), which FoodCycle put together and asked Project Leaders to put up on the wall in a visible place. FoodCycle also sent along small versions of these with stands asking for them to be placed on each of the tables, however the Project Leaders were uncomfortable with displaying these signs and would happily forget to put these out each week.

In the community kitchen I assumed the role of 'Hosting Project Leader', and in the following sections, I reflect on three key points of interaction between hosts and guests – the help yourself table, eating together, and potential for reciprocity. Exploring these encounters, I illustrate how – like Cloke et al. (2017) found in the food bank – the community kitchen can be seen as a place where encounters have the

potential to create both difference and sameness between guests and hosts, and volunteers more generally.

Figure 33: FoodCycle menu. (Photo by Author).

Figure 34: Hosting Project Leader serving salad and chips. (Photo by Author).

Figure 35: The Project Agreement. (From FoodCycle Regional Manager).

8.3 THE HELP YOURSELF TABLE

The food is used in three different ways in the community kitchen. Firstly, the surplus food is transformed into a three-course meal; secondly, the food is used for centrepieces, where snacks and bowls of fruit are used to adorn the tables where guests sit; and thirdly, food is taken home to eat – from both the help yourself table and any leftovers from the cooked meal. In this section, I focus on the tertiary form of food redistribution - the help yourself table.

Food is spread across the counter connecting the kitchen and hall, covering all available space. Rummaging through the bright colours of surplus fruit and vegetables, the cooking team pick out the freshest ingredients to use in the meal. Assured they've now got enough to finish the cook with; I sort through the remaining food, separating out what's edible and what can only be described as food waste. Interspersed among the fresh food are bags of ever-so slightly stale pastries and at least twenty loaves of bread from the Coop. I carry these over to the help yourself table then continue sorting through the veg. (Fieldnotes 11ᵗʰ November 2017)

The help yourself table is positioned at the side of the hall against the bare plasterboard wall (see Figure 36) and was designed to be a way to redistribute excess surplus food and provide guests with additional access to food that they can take away and cook at home. Where the kitchen team have first choice over the collection in order to make the meal and hosts put together fruit bowls or snacks for the tables, any food leftover that is still edible goes on the help yourself table for guests.

"...it's obviously what the kitchen have rejected, so it's like the worst of what we were given. Which I get, because obviously we're going to want to make the meal with the like nicer stuff? But some weeks what's leftover can sometimes look a bit unappealing..." – Hosting Project Leader

Due to the nature of where the food is sourced, any food that is not used in the meal has to be sorted through before redistribution, as it often includes food that is mouldy or too far turned to eat. But as a general principle, very little is wasted if it can be helped, and volunteers were observed – and I myself took part in – salvaging as much food as possible. Even going so far as to pick out individual cherry tomatoes that have gone bad from an otherwise good quality punnet or removing the outer layers of a lettuce to reveal the still-crisp leaves below. Though a slightly time-consuming activity, it meant that the food looked more appealing, which in turn meant that it was more likely to be taken by the guests and less food was wasted overall (see Figure 37).

Interestingly, there was also a further level of food redistribution that happened in the Bristol project. One of the regular guests would hang around at the end of the meal –

sometimes even arriving at the end of the session and missing the food entirely – in order to pick up any leftover produce on the help yourself table. Describing himself as a 'freegan' – someone who is anti-capitalist, anti-consumerism and who avoids paying for food in order to reduce overconsumption of resources (Shantz, 2005) – this guest would then take the food and redistribute to other projects, his friends and neighbours. Usually at the end of the meal the freshest items on the help yourself table have been taken, and so what he redistributes is an odd assortment of items, usually including bananas (we had a seemingly never-ending supply), wrinkled chillies and perhaps some soft apples or shrivelled limes. Any items that other projects will not take, he uses, and laughing at himself, he tells me that he often ends up walking around with a banana bread in his jacket pocket in case someone should need food. This image reminded me of Holmes' (2019) work on thrift in which she found that there is enjoyment to be found in making or transforming something into something which has new, or added value, and the enjoyment in gifting this item to another person. Significantly, this guest always waited for the other guests to take food before he would take anything himself, which indicated that he was not experiencing food insecurity at that time. Incidentally, this thrift dynamic could also be used to describe the enjoyment volunteers get from 'saving' food through the collection, to 'transforming' food in the kitchen, and ultimately 'gifting' food through the hosting team.

Figure 36: The 'Help Yourself' Tables. (Photo by Author).

Figure 37: Food surplus on the counter between kitchen and hall. (Photo by Author).

8.3.1 GUEST ACCESS TO THE HELP YOURSELF TABLE

An argument is kicking off between two guests who have arrived early. As they're shouting at each other to fuck off from the courtyard outside, a new volunteer slips past them into the hall – great first impression. The argument doesn't look like it's going to finish anytime soon, so I try to defuse the situation by offering them drinks – this sort of works, but I end up having to ask them to stay apart from each other. They clearly know each other from elsewhere, but I've never noticed them engage with each other until now. Before I say anything else, they both walk into the hall and sit down at different tables to wait for the meal to start. Within moments there is tension around the food on the help yourself table

and I have to ask them both to wait until quarter past 2 before taking any food, to be fair to the other guests. The anticipation is palpable – I observe how alert they are to the other's movements, watching each other if either of them dared to get up from their respective tables. Another guest turns up – a mate of one of the guests inside. I can't ask them to wait outside, I think, not now that there are people inside already. But as soon as they walk in the room, they go straight to the help yourself table and I have to ask them to wait too. It's only 2pm at this point. Another volunteer asks me to help put up a sign at the front of the Settlement, but we don't have enough cable ties. The guest who is sitting alone overhears and offers to grab some from their van. As we return to the hall after securing the sign, we see that the two guests who are still inside have started to help themselves to food. "I guess it's help yourself <u>now</u> then is it?" the guest who gave us cable ties remarks, clearly annoyed as they hurry over to the table. I felt bad because they were doing me a favour and have missed out on a few items the other guests have already picked up. I'm also frustrated because it's only five past 2 and other guests who also might rely on this as a source of fresh produce won't likely arrive for another 10 minutes. A little while later, the cable tie guest comes up to me holding up some leeks and a bag of other veg saying, "I can cook this week!" – they live in their van and from their comment I don't think they have access to fresh food very often. (Fieldnotes 2nd June 2018)

As I mentioned, the community kitchen opens at 2.15pm every Saturday, ready to serve the first course at 2.30pm. Because the Bristol project distributes any excess surplus food via the help yourself table at the start of the meal, there is usually a small crowd of guests waiting for the doors to open from about 2pm – and sometimes earlier than this. As a rule, the project won't let people enter the hall before 2.15pm (except to ask for a hot drink or to use the toilet); this is said to be so that the hosts have ample time to set up the room properly, but in reality, it's to ensure that people don't have access to the help yourself table before 2.15pm in order to ensure fair access for all guests, many of whom might not arrive until the official opening time. If the weather is bad, then guests have the option to wait in the reception in the building across the courtyard, but few do, which reflects the high level of anticipation, competition, and anxiety around the help yourself table. Because for some, the help yourself table is an important source of food for the week:

*"Luce, I still haven't got my money yet!" one of the regulars
exclaims as I'm putting some food waste in the bin, giving me an
update on the benefit claim she put in a few weeks before. A bit
later she comes up to me in the hall after she's collected food from
the help yourself table and tells me that, along with another
project, "FoodCycle keeps me alive". (Fieldnotes 7th July 2018)*

During the winter it was easy to ensure people did not enter the hall before 2.15pm, because the door acted as a physical barrier against the cold, and the guests. However, in the summer, the hall would get stiflingly hot due to the heat from the kitchen, and the doors were always propped open for fresh air. This meant that the physical signifier of when the project was open or closed was no longer there. Though regardless, this itself was not always an effective 'barrier', and some Project Leaders had even taken to putting a sign up on the door reiterating the opening times.

The strict regulation around opening times led to a tense atmosphere at the start of the meal, which sometimes led to arguments between guests jostling for access to the table.

*People are pouncing on the food while we're still putting it out.
They're hovering around it, waiting for us to bring more over.
(Fieldnotes 30th June 2018)*

The decision to restrict access to leftover surplus food until the meal officially opened also unintentionally created a dynamic of withholding, which could have a negative emotional impact on guests. Whilst the policy was implemented to ensure equity, it nevertheless had uncomfortable outcomes:

*Despite a sign on the door stating that the community kitchen
opens at 2.15, people have started to arrive for the meal about half
an hour before. This is pretty normal, and as expected, one of the
regulars pops their head in to ask for a couple of coffees. While
making the drinks, I notice that they've walked inside with another
regular guest and are now standing by the kitchen. "What's on the
menu today then, Luce?" one asks, as the other picks up some
bananas from the side, examining them. Standing on the other side
of the counter at this point, I say, "do you mind waiting until we
open properly before taking food? I'm not sure that the kitchen has*

*finished using it yet". Responding defensively, the guest puts the
bananas back down, picks up her coffee and walks back outside
saying over her shoulder, "I was just looking – I'm not taking
anything!" I follow her outside to explain, but she's clearly
embarrassed, and just tells me to "stop being such a Nazi! I'm
hungry". I go back inside and grab the bananas for her.
(Fieldnotes March 24th2018)*

Such encounters, though approached with the intention of providing fair access to
food, had the effect of creating and articulating difference between guests and
volunteers – for the volunteers had the power to control access to the space and the
food within, while the guests had to adhere to the 'rules'.

Interestingly, not all of the FoodCycle projects operated using a 'help yourself' table,
and Project Leaders were always interested to hear about other management tactics
that would reduce tension between guests, and between guests and volunteers. One
suggestion was to equally divide the food in advance - for example, in a nearby
project in Bath any surplus food is divided equally into bags and handed out to
guests at the end of the meal. However, while this may have reduced the feeling of
competition and tension at the beginning of the meal, the Settlement had very limited
space to store the food during the meal itself. It would also have taken away a degree
of agency for the guests who could currently choose their own food, which may
perhaps increase waste as a result, and may reduce the amount of food accessible to
people who rely on it as a form of food aid. As one of the Project Leaders remarked:

> *"I don't know if that's a better way of doing it or not, because you
> don't know what people are gonna want to take!? If they end up
> just taking a bag, are they then going to waste half of what's in it if
> they don't want it anyway?"*

Weighing this up, the Project Leaders decided to keep the help yourself table at the
beginning of the meal. It's important to recognise that the help yourself table is not
part of the core FoodCycle model, as the community kitchens are only designed to
reduce hunger and social isolation by providing a three-course meal for free. It is for
this reason that projects deal with their surplus in different ways, and in Bristol, the

help yourself table provided an easy way of getting rid of excess food while providing further opportunity for alleviating hunger outside of this space.

8.3.2 VOLUNTEER ACCESS TO THE FOOD

Importantly, it was not just the guests who took food home with them, as volunteers would also make use of the surplus food. But there were practices around this that were distinct from the ways in which guests interacted with the food. For example, while the cooking team was preparing the meal, volunteers would often take some of the surplus food spread across the counter to use at home themselves. I remember when I started this research, I was told to take food because "it's surplus" and there was always a lot of it. Interestingly even with this encouragement, volunteers would often only take a token amount – and usually items that were already in excess (such as bananas). As the majority of the volunteers were not food insecure, there was a discomfort around this because volunteers often felt that the food would be of more use to the guests.

> *I didn't have breakfast today, so I ate a banana from the collection while I was setting up the hall. I told the other hosts that they could take some food if they liked and a couple of them put some fruit in their bags for later. Another volunteer refused the offer, stating that she'd feel bad taking anything from people who might need it more. (Fieldnotes 7th July 2018)*

Interestingly, if volunteers took food, they usually only took food *before* it was sorted and moved to the help yourself table. Once the food was sorted and moved – essentially, once the food was handled with *care* and *purpose* – it transformed from being excess surplus food or food waste, into food *aid* intended only for the guests. The act of moving the food away from the communal volunteer area marked the change in that food's status.

Once the guests leave, and if the guest who redistributes food to other projects does not show, then the residual food from the help yourself table will be once again offered out to the volunteers to take home. Because many of the volunteers get

involved due to environmental reasons – namely, a dislike of food waste – they will often take the odd few items at this stage as anything left goes in the food waste bin.

8.4 MATERIALITY AND EATING TOGETHER

Established to create a better 'guest experience' through hospitality, the hosting team were responsible for making sure that guests felt comfortable in the space and had an opportunity to interact with other people – as well as coordinating the delivery of the meal. For example, the hosts would actively welcome people, make conversation with the guests, sit and eat with them and try and prompt conversation with others at the table. Described as a 'specialist' role by the Regional Manager, the hosting team was brought in to create a dining-out experience and to create an atmosphere of welcome for the guests who were deemed to be vulnerable people. In so doing, they tried to draw out commonalities with and between guests, and to create connection between the community kitchen and the social eating side of the project.

Materiality played an important role in constructing the 'guest experience'. In particular, the care given to where tables were positioned and what they looked like was especially significant, because much care and consideration was given to their presentation. For example, the hosts ensured that they were positioned so that guests (and hosts) could move easily between them but that they were not so far apart that they felt distant, to ensure that conversation could still travel between tables. They were set with enough space for guests to get to the help yourself table without feeling cramped, and they were moved outside when the weather was warm so that guests could enjoy the sunshine. The tables themselves were each covered with a red and white gingham tablecloth, place settings (fork, knife, spoon, glass), a water jug and a centrepiece of some kind – which was usually a fruit bowl made from excess surplus from the meal. Interestingly, this materiality did not just draw on the hospitality industry for inspiration, but also on image of the family meal. Gingham is a fabric often associated with past and simpler times, which in this context, may refer to nostalgia for a time when people would traditionally sit down at the dinner table and eat together (see Figure 38). FoodCycle were – perhaps unconsciously - drawing on this nostalgic symbolism in their community kitchen to affect the atmosphere of the meal itself, which in some ways had the desired outcome, as many guests remarked

on the calm environment in comparison to other free food places. Here is one such example:

> *"FoodCycle is a good one to come to because it's nice and relaxed, fairly civilised. Compared to err, it's a completely different vibe to [other sites] where you've got fights breaking out and you've got someone being arrested or ambulances being called out because of somebody rolling around on the floor." – George, community kitchen guest*

Eating together was an important part of the project and was the way that FoodCycle worked to tackle social isolation – through commensality – not only between guests, but also between volunteers and guests. Once the meal was served and all the guests had a dish, the volunteers would serve themselves and go and sit at the tables with the guests. Sometimes if the room was particularly busy this meant creating new place settings and could be quite a pointed moment in the meal, where the guests were no longer 'served' but were experiencing the meal together with the volunteers. It was done with the intention of bringing people together and is a form of encounter that has great potential for creating sameness – for as Dunbar (2017) found, eating together can create social bonding. This was a finding that resonated with my own observations, and on many occasions, hosts would come up to me at the end of the session and apologise for not helping clear plates because they had been absorbed in conversation - they were usually surprised when I encouraged them to chat.

In most circumstances, this was a practice that was well received by guests, particularly for those who attended other free food places where this was not a common practice. As a guest, Pedro explains it is a practice that creates sameness between the guests and volunteers.

> *"...having volunteers actually sitting with us, and you know, being like us, in a way, is actually amazing." – Pedro, community kitchen guest*

However, it could feel uncomfortable at times, and I observed many awkward conversations between guests and volunteers and experienced my fair share too.

Some guests did not want to sit and talk with a stranger, and part of the skill in the hosting role was gauging which guests wanted to talk. As one of the Cooking Project Leader's observed:

> *"...we need to equally respect the wishes of guests. Cause some guests don't want - well my impression is that some guests don't necessarily want to talk. So, we have to respect that as well."*

Interestingly, the discomfort I witnessed at times was created by the fact that the guests were regulars and knew each other, whereas the volunteers were often unknown to the guests. Because of the high turnover in the volunteer team, the volunteers were, ironically, the true 'guests' in the project, and for a new volunteer to go and sit down with a group of regular guests as their 'host' often meant witnessing a reversal in roles, for in many circumstances the guests would have to involve the host in their conversations, welcoming the host to the table. Indeed, during the year that I conducted this research, I was the only volunteer who knew the name of (almost) all of the guests. Even long-standing volunteers struggled to remember people's names, and often came to me to remind them, contributing to the feeling of distinct communities within this space.

Furthermore, not all volunteers wanted to sit with guests, and in the case of the cooking team, this was sometimes out of discomfort, but also out of exhaustion after creating a large three-course meal. Consequently, it was commonplace to see the cooking team sit together at a table, go outside to eat, or eat in the kitchen. Interestingly, such occurrences weren't inherently good or bad, for they themselves were likely to be strangers to one another and were connecting and socialising together over a meal. However, as a 'food aid' project, this maintained the distinction of two parallel communities at play within this space, where difference between those who give and those who receive food was perpetuated.

Figure 38: The dining room. (Photo by Author).

8.5 POTENTIAL FOR RECIPROCITY

As I stated earlier in this chapter, FoodCycle implemented changes to the way that their community kitchens were run and managed in order to improve the 'guest experience' and improve health and safety and safeguarding processes. While many of these processes were necessary, they also compounded certain power inequalities within the space, and in so doing, restricted agency and created an "*us and them*" dynamic between guests and volunteers, as described by one Project Leader.

In particular, health and safety processes had a significant impact on movement within the space, where guests were strictly not allowed to go into the kitchen or the store cupboard, and volunteers were even told by the Regional Manager that guests should not help to clear away furniture like chairs and tables in case they hurt themselves. Such regulations were coupled by the emphasis on 'treating' the guests to a dining experience, so that they did not feel like they had to 'ask' for anything, which meant that guests were served food at their tables, rather than having to queue up for their meal. As the Regional Manager explained, such approaches were intended to address stigma associated with the image and feel of a soup kitchen:

"I think that FoodCycle as a whole, now, now we've got the hosting team in, is about making sure that people don't feel like they're asking for anything? So, there's something very different for me about sitting down at a table with a tablecloth and being given some food, rather than queueing up for it at a hatch like you're at a soup kitchen. So, I feel that that is being addressed - so some of the stigma is probably being addressed as well."

Interestingly, while many guests visibly enjoyed this approach, because they did not have to be involved in preparing, cooking or serving food, others found it frustrating because they couldn't choose what they had in their meal, and one guest in particular would actively resist being served, and would each week walk up to the counter to choose their food themselves. Not that there was much 'choice' to be had, because there was only one meal available, but it did give them the option to exclude certain ingredients and have more of others. Another participant in my study told me that while he had gotten used to being served, at first, he felt that it took away his agency because he was being told to sit and wait for his food to be served and then cleared. Echoing this sentiment, another guest explained that it prevented him from feeling like they were contributing to the meal – essentially making it *feel* like charity:

"Volunteers waiting? It makes us feel like we're doing nothing! We've done nothing to deserve this, but there you go - 'enjoy it!'...it's like going to a place and not paying. You know? Like there's a little bit that you can do, and you're not doing it, you know - just getting your plate, and putting your plate back." – Pedro, community kitchen guest

Reflecting on this dynamic at another session, Pedro described this in terms of restrictions on agency:

"In this life we get paid in different ways – different currencies. These places, they do good by giving you food and energy, but they don't give you a way to use that energy."

The professionalisation of health and safety processes, as well as the introduction of the hosting team had the unintended consequence of restricting possibilities for reciprocity, where guests could contribute in some way to the meal. Describing this transition, one of the longer-standing Project Leaders described the professionalisation of processes as having created a 'them and us' environment:

> "...there's a good and bad side to it. It does make things more organised, and, you know, puts procedures into place for safeguarding and things like that, health and safety and all these things that sound really boring, but I suppose are really important. But it does create, I think a more 'them and us' environment. I do think it is more 'them and us' than it used to be when I think back to when I first started...before if someone came along and said, 'oh do you want a hand with the washing up?' we'd be like, 'yeah, come on in - wash up' like, it was fine. But obviously now you can't do that. I get why, but it does create a bit of a barrier."

Despite these restrictions, guests would sometimes help clear away dishes, putting them on the counter between the hall and the kitchen, or help to pack away the tables and chairs. The restrictions were very much imposed by the central charity, and in practice, Project Leaders were relaxed about guests participating in the clear up as long as they did not go in the kitchen, because it was felt that these moments of reciprocity enabled it to be more of a *community* project, rather than a service – though it shouldn't be overlooked that this reciprocity highlights power inequalities within the space, because these forms of reciprocity could not occur without the volunteers allowing it. Another way in which guests performed reciprocity, was through the donation pot. Some guests would put money in the donation pot, pointedly, to 'pay' for the meal – and would often request the donation pot if it was not put out, dropping a couple of quid in. I found this interesting because these were guests who I knew to live on a very low income, and it made me think of other studies of low-pay (social eating initiatives) rather than no-pay food aid projects (FoodCycle), where having a low-cost attached to the meal meant that it reduced the stigma associated with charity (Smith & Harvey, 2021, p. 10) and points to a resistance to 'the handout'.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have explored the everyday of the community kitchen, from processes of collecting food and setting up for the meal, to the packing down and further redistribution of food. Within this I have paid particular attention to how national processes play out within local settings – in this case in the Bristol Barton Hill project; and examined three moments, or opportunities for 'encounters' between volunteers and guests within the community kitchen in depth. Through exploration of the help yourself table, eating together, and reciprocity, I draw attention to ways in which rules and practices have the potential to create sameness or highlight and perpetuate difference between guests and volunteers.

Like the food bank, the community kitchen can be understood as an ambivalent space. It is a site where commensality and community-building are made possible, but also the articulation of distinction and in some ways, othering. There is a particularly striking power imbalance between guests and volunteers in the community kitchen, which is especially evident in the way that space is negotiated around access to food. It is an imbalance that is compounded by the different socio-economic backgrounds of volunteers and guests and the lack of a sense of connection to 'place' in Barton Hill, where the project is located. However, whilst these can be seen as challenges for the project, it is also important to acknowledge that the project was popular both with volunteers and guests and provided some guests with their only access to fresh and nutritious food during the week. For others, it provided a break from cooking on a budget, or respite from other, more chaotic free food sites. In the following chapters I turn to the final site of food aid, the community food centre.

9. THE PLACE: THE BLUE FINGER & FEED BRISTOL

Unlike the community kitchen and food banks, which were nestled within predominantly residential inner-city areas, the community food centre was found on the edge of East and North Bristol, on a six-acre 'wildlife gardening hub' (Avon Wildlife Trust, 2021a) called 'Feed Bristol'[42] (see Figure 39). On long-term lease from Bristol City Council, Feed Bristol is managed by 'Avon Wildlife Trust' – a charity which works across the South West of England to protect urban wildlife and inspire people to connect with nature in their everyday lives (Avon Wildlife Trust, 2021b). Marketing the site as a growing and conservation nature project with "mixed habitats demonstrating different techniques" (Avon Wildlife Trust, 2021a), Avon Wildlife Trust runs a number of educational programmes, talks and events on the site, as well as hiring out different spaces as a venue for external groups and organisations. The site is also home to a wildflower nursery and various community food growing businesses, such as Sims Hill Shared Harvest, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project who hosted the Community Food Centre.

Sitting at the base of a long stretch of grade 1 agricultural land known as the 'Blue Finger'[43], Feed Bristol has some of the most fertile land for food production in Bristol. Indeed, grade 1 is categorised as the 'best and most versatile' soil and is incredibly rare in the UK, with less than 3% of land falling into this classification (EcoJam, 2021; Koopsman et al., 2017). Only 500 metres wide and 20km long, the Blue Finger stands out against the lower grade agricultural soil that is commonplace in much of the region (Koopsman et al., 2017, p. 158) and has historically been an area of Bristol where market gardens were located, providing local food into the city. However, this valuable land has not been sufficiently protected in the UK's planning system, and much of it has been lost to major infrastructure developments over the years - the most significant of which is the M32, which was built between the 1960s and 1970s and cuts straight down the centre of the Blue Finger, obscuring much of its lower half (see Figure 40). More recently there were even plans to develop a

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[42] In 2020 Feed Bristol relaunched as 'Grow Wilder'.
[43] Named after the colour of grade 1 soil on agricultural classification maps.

Metrobus station on part of the Feed Bristol site itself – but this was successfully blocked by collective campaign efforts in 2019.

Situated in the suburb of Broomhill near Frenchay, the Feed Bristol site is located four miles outside the city centre, and unlike Easton and Barton Hill, it has a feel of the countryside because of the sheer amount of green space that surrounds it. Within walking distance are expansive green and wooded areas, such as Begbrook Green Park, Stoke Park Estate, Oldbury Court Estate, Snuff Mills and Eastville Park, through which runs the River Frome. However, the Feed Bristol site itself also backs onto the M32 and is bordered by busy roads. This creates an interesting contrast between the green and wooded natural environment and the motorway, which affectively cuts through this experience of nature physically, visually and audibly. The sound of the M32 traffic is particularly invasive and creates a constant background hum across the Feed Bristol site.

In Broomhill, there are a couple of corner shops and a takeaway in the direct vicinity of Feed Bristol, catering for the small number of residential roads opposite the site. But with only a small number of residential properties compared to the green space and road infrastructure in the area, the main shopping outlets are in Fishponds, which is about a twenty-to-thirty-minute walk uphill. This means that there is little foot traffic in the area and, situated on a busy main road alongside the side of the M32, Feed Bristol is not somewhere people usually happen upon – there is not even a pavement on Feed Bristol's side of the road. As a consequence, the significance of place for this chapter lies more in the land and nature itself. In the grade 1 agricultural soil on which Feed Bristol was established, and which brought people from different parts of the city together to learn about and work the land. Though situated on the edge of East and North Bristol, the site is a hub of agricultural activity for the entire city, and aside from a few local residents involved in projects from the surrounding neighbourhood, the majority of people travelled to Feed Bristol via car, public transport or bicycle.

Figure 39: Sign outside Feed Bristol entrance. Photo by Author.

Figure 40: Location of the Blue Finger in Bristol. (Koopmans et al., 2017, p. 158)

9.1 FEED BRISTOL

Entering the Feed Bristol site through a small carpark, there are two medium-sized polytunnels along the left-hand border of the site, surrounded by beds of plants and

wildflowers. Walking along a path directly ahead of the entrance, and past tables full of wildflowers for sale, there is a sheltered outdoor cooking space on the right (see Figure 41), against the side of 'the classroom' which is the main building used by Avon Wildlife Trust for their training courses (see Figure 42). On the other side of the classroom is a smaller building used as a kitchen and common room space, next to which are two eco-toilets run on recycled rainwater, while behind the classroom is the larger wildflower nursery (see Figure 43). Further along the path, opposite the main building, is an outdoor canopied area used as the meeting place for the community food centre (see Figure 44). The path runs round to the right past the canopied seating area, and along to the far field. To the left of the field is a pond, while on the right is Sims Hill's packing shed (see Figure 45), where they pack the veg shares ready for distribution across the city. Past this are two smaller polytunnels used by another food business 'Edible Futures' to grow different varieties of salad. Straight ahead at the far side of the field is a large polytunnel used by Sims Hill, next to which is the roundhouse, which is often used for training courses. Next to this is an outdoor campfire circle area (see Figure 46), which is surrounded by various growing plots used by Sims Hill and Edible Futures. Paths crisscross between the plots, and trees surround the entire field providing a visual and physical boundary to the site (see Figure 47**Error! Reference source not found.**). Importantly, there are aspects of Feed Bristol that are not included in this description because the community food centre did not take place on the entire site, but was predominantly based between the fields, polytunnels and outdoor canopied areas.

Figure 41: The outdoor cooking space. (Photo by author).

Figure 42: View from under the canopied seating area - classroom ahead, kitchen to the left. (Photo by author).

Figure 43: Wildflowers for sale at Feed Bristol. (Photo by author).

Figure 44: Looking back upon the canopied outdoor seating area. (Photo by author).

Figure 45: The packing shed – a view from outside the large polytunnel. (Photo by author).

Figure 46: The outdoor campfire area – with Stoke Park Estate in the background. (Photo by author).

Figure 47: Growing fields surrounding the large polytunnel. (Photo by author).

10. THE COMMUNITY FOOD CENTRE

In this chapter, I explore the community food centre – a project that sought to address food insecurity 'holistically' and which sought to set itself apart from conventional food aid approaches, such as the food bank. Talking through the everyday of the project, I examine the benefits and challenges to doing food aid 'differently', paying particular attention to the food provided, opportunities for reciprocity, and the sustainability and reach of the project.

10.1 THE MODEL, REAL ECONOMY AND SIMS HILL SHARED HARVEST

The Community Food Centre I explore in this chapter was established by a Bristol-based Community Benefits Society called 'Real Economy' in partnership with 'Sims Hill Shared Harvest', a Community Supported Agriculture project (CSA) based on the Feed Bristol site. Inspired by the Canadian model of the same name, Real Economy opened the Community Food Centre with Sims Hill in January 2017 as a pilot site for, what was intended to be, a network of community food centres across the city, which would be overseen by Real Economy. Adapting the model for Bristol, Real Economy had a vision for three types of community food centres – 'land-based', such as the project at Feed Bristol; 'neighbourhood', which would be based in community spaces in disadvantaged areas of the city; and 'central', which would be a central hub offering additional services, food redistribution and hire space for community groups (Pardoe et al. 2017). During the latter months that I conducted this research at Feed Bristol, Real Economy opened their first 'neighbourhood' community food centre in North Bristol. However, a year later, Real Economy closed, and with it, their vision for community food centres across the city. As a consequence, the community food centre I explore in this chapter was their first and only example of a land-based community food centre in the UK.

Pioneered in Toronto, Canada, by an organisation called 'The Stop'[44], the Community Food Centre model was developed to holistically support people

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[44] Unlike the UK, where the rise of the food bank has been a relatively recent phenomenon, in Canada, food banks have been commonplace since the 1980s and have been widely adopted as the emergency response to food insecurity. Like many organisations, The Stop initially responded to food insecurity

experiencing hardship to access good food, by working in a 'multidimensional' way to also address other vulnerabilities that people might experience when food insecure. They are physical spaces where people can develop their knowledge and skills around food, particularly growing and cooking, and where people have the opportunity for connection with others and the development of community life. For example, The Stop have three main sites that host a variety of food offers – a community growing space, farmers market, community kitchen, drop-in centre and healthy food bank – alongside advocacy, and financial and support services. In essence, they are places where people can come together to grow, cook, share and advocate for good food; and by working in an integrated way, they aim to build health, belonging and social justice for people in disadvantaged areas (Community Food Centres Canada, 2021).

10.2 REAL ECONOMY

As an organisation, Real Economy originally functioned as a food distribution cooperative, sourcing local and ethically sourced food from the Bristol region and distributing the items to its Coop members through collection points across the city (see Figure 48). Its founder had been heavily involved in the development of the local currency, 'Bristol Pound', before setting up the Cooperative, which they designed to play an active role in promoting localisation of food systems and the economy in Bristol. Alongside these objectives, the Real Economy also sought to make 'good food' – which, for them, referred to fresh and local organic food that had been sustainably sourced – accessible to people experiencing hardship and living in disadvantaged areas of the city. However, Real Economy found that their Cooperative model alone was not able to achieve this objective. Inspired by the Canadian model and wanting to redress the disparity in access to good food in the city, they re-formed as a Community Benefits Society and positioned the Cooperative as a Trading Arm, the profits from which would go towards funding the development of community food centres.

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in their community by forming as a food bank, but over time they recognised that distributing food bank parcels alone would not support people out of chronic food insecurity, nor would they address the interrelated issues of social isolation and poor health. In response, The Stop developed the Community Food Centre model.

When they launched their pilot community food centre in 2017, food bank use had been on the rise for about 10 years in the UK. The Trussell Trust were reporting rapidly increasing figures year on year, and initiatives using surplus food to address food insecurity - such as FoodCycle – were becoming more commonplace. There were real concerns that the UK were following in the footsteps of the US and Canada, where food banks and surplus food initiatives have shown little impact on either reducing the production of food surplus or the prevalence of food insecurity, and where food banks had become normalised in response to the retrenchment of government welfare (Caraher & Furey, 2018). Taking this stance, Real Economy set out to develop a more holistic intervention to food insecurity. One that they believed would address not only the issue of access to (good) food, but also address related and intersecting health and wellbeing concerns that compound experiences of hardship and create 'chronic vulnerability' and long-term need. Much like the Canadian CFC model, Real Economy sought to use food as a tool to address these concerns and re-establish people with a sense of connection to place and to others. However, unlike the Canadian model, they took a critical view of food banks and the use of surplus food and sought to work outside of these systems. With this in mind, Real Economy created their community food centre model around the pillars: 'providing healthy food', 'building community life', and 'reimagining our society'. Pillars that I unpack later in this chapter in section 4.

Figure 48: Real Economy Food Cooperative. (Real Economy Website - no longer exists).

Interestingly, similar holistic approaches to food insecurity have become more popular in the UK in recent years[45], in particular, as experiences of food insecurity persist and, for many, become chronic. However, it is important to note that at the time I conducted this research, Real Economy were seen to be offering an innovative response to a food insecurity phenomenon that had, until then, been primarily addressed in terms of short-term crisis through food banks and drop-in meal services.

10.3 SIMS HILL SHARED HARVEST

While Real Economy assumed the role of "idea starter and facilitator of the community food centre model" (Former Community Worker, CFC), Sims Hill

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[45] For example, in Bristol it could be said that 'Heart of BS13' in Hartcliffe is organically developing into a similar CFC type of support provision model. Another local example would be through the social enterprise 'The Long Table' in Gloucestershire.

Shared Harvest played a central role in the delivery of the project at Feed Bristol – hosting the group on the site, sharing produce and supporting with various activities.

As a Community Supported Agriculture project (CSA), Sims Hill use permaculture principles to grow non-certified organic produce for their members, who share in the responsibility, risk and reward of the harvest. They charge a monthly fee for either a 'full-share' or 'half-share' of vegetables, which are then dropped to collection points across the city on a weekly basis (though predominantly in East Bristol). Interestingly, Sims Hill also have the option for members to join on a 'work-share' basis, whereby members help on the farm for a certain number of hours a week in exchange for their food share. However, work-share places were restricted in order to ensure the financial viability of the CSA and at the time I conducted this research, Sims Hill were providing food to around 110 households in Bristol. Wanting to work more closely with their wider community and provide opportunities for engagement and social action through land-based projects, Sims Hill partnered with Real Economy to develop the Community Food Centre. At the time, the Founder of Real Economy was also the Chair Trustee for Sims Hill, and seizing the opportunity for collaboration, gained funding from the Tudor Trust to develop the project.

> *"There was an opportunity, as I was the chair at Sims Hill, to try to make something happen. Sims Hill had always been interested in this area, and we had this opportunity to make it real for them." -*
> *Real Economy Founder*

They had the opportunity to 'make it real' for Sims Hill, but also for Real Economy – as this was to be a trial for their city-wide initiative. Taking place once a week, they were able to pay a Community Worker to coordinate the Community Food Centre through the funding from the Tudor Trust, as well as subsidise the cost of vegetables, a bit of time for Sims Hill workers, and a small number of Real Economy vouchers that were distributed to those experiencing hardship and accessing the group because of food insecurity.

10.4 HOW IT WORKS

With regards to 'food aid', the community food centre provided three forms of food support. The first, was a lunch provided on-site; the second, was a half-share bag of vegetables grown by Sims Hill for members to take away at the end of the day and use at home; and the third, was the offer of £45 worth of Real Economy cooperative vouchers to be used towards the cost of cupboard staples – but this latter offer was only available when a member first joined the group.

> *"We also give people Real Economy vouchers so they can access - for the first 6 weeks - kitchen cupboard essentials. Like pasta, and lentils and chickpeas and meat and dairy even. Chocolate if they want. Those sorts of things that are giving their meals everything that they need, rather than just vegetables." – Former Community Worker*

These were intended to give members an element of choice in what was purchased through the cooperative and the items available with the voucher were not restricted like in a food bank.

Finding that referral pathways into food aid sites, such as food banks, can sometimes create barriers to access, Real Economy developed a three-pronged referral process, whereby people could self-refer (essentially just turn up), be peer-referred (from a member of the group), or be referred by a support agency, such as a debt advice agency. While everyone who attended had access to a free lunch on the day, the referral pathway impacted on the other levels of food support that a person would receive. In theory, someone referred directly through a support agency, or via peer-referral, would qualify for entitlement to food support immediately. Whereas when someone self-refers, they would only be entitled to food support if the Community Worker determines they are in need of support and have participated in the group in a meaningful way. In practice, this was a quick process as the Community Worker would ascertain their level of need through a 1:1 risk assessment at the beginning of the day. This was an important process, as not everyone who attended experienced food insecurity or chronic vulnerability of some form. Some people (like myself) attended the group for other purposes, such as research, or for interest; and those who

wanted to be involved for these purposes were considered 'helpers' of the group and would not receive food aid – though would often be given surplus produce from the farm on the day.

During the months that I participated in the community food centre, there were approximately 15 people who accessed the group for food support. Three to five of these people attended the project on a regular basis, and on average there would be between three and eight participants attending each week. Though each of the members of the group experienced some form of food insecurity, it manifested in different ways for people, and was not always driven by financial insecurity. For example, some participants were food insecure because of issues around access and/or poor mental and physical health. With regards to culture and demographic makeup, the majority of participants were White British though from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, and interestingly, at the start of my fieldwork, those who attended the group on a regular basis were predominantly men, though as the weather grew warmer more women attended. There were very few people from ethnic minorities who attended, which reflects a lack of diversity across the growing and agricultural sector in the UK more generally (Norrie, 2017). Within the community food centre this could been partly attributed to where the project was being promoted and the referral agencies they were working with, but it may also have been attributed to feelings of discomfort in a predominantly white space. As the Community Worker explained:

> *"...when we did have someone who was Iranian, there were actually some tensions of food traditions and cultural traditions and we would have had to work through that...That would have been a nice challenge, but it was a challenge, and actually they didn't stay! And so, was that because it wasn't that inclusive for them? I don't really know."*

Shortly after I started this research, the Community Worker who had been leading the group since its inception, left the project, and a new Community Worker who had previously been a 'helper' of the group, took on that role. Though they were based at the Feed Bristol site and worked closely with the Sims Hill Growers to coordinate activities and food, the Community Worker was recruited, and line managed by Real

Economy, who hired them on a part-time basis for 1.5 days a week. In that time, they were expected to plan activities each week appropriate to the needs of the group, order any cupboard goods they might require for the following week's lunch, run the community food centre on the day, collect data, and establish and liaise with support agencies who would refer people to the project. With very little paid time allotted, it was a busy role, despite the small size of the group.

10.5 ON THE DAY

The community food centre at Feed Bristol took place every Thursday from 10am to 4pm. Come rain or shine, the group would meet in the canopied seating area and share a cup of tea or coffee before starting the day's activities, which included participating in farm work and a community meal. Starting farming activities at 10.30am, these could be different each week, as they were designed to support the ongoing work of the CSA, and could be anything from sowing seeds, weeding, planting seedlings, harvesting crops, to transporting wood chip for paths in the polytunnels (see Figure 49).

At 11.30am the group would take a break from farming and return to the outdoor canopied area, where everyone gathers together to prepare and cook lunch. This process was designed to be led by the members, who would decide what to make, based on what seasonal vegetables were available from the farm. Sitting together around one big table (made up of a hodgepodge of many smaller tables of all shapes and sizes) each member of the group would contribute in some way towards the meal – whether this meant gathering herbs to flavour the food, chopping vegetables, fetching plates and cutlery from the kitchen, cooking the food, washing up, or making people teas and coffees – everyone was actively involved in some capacity (see Figure 50). Mainly using the fresh vegetables that were grown on-site, the project was designed so that any spices or cupboard goods that were used to bolster the meals were sourced through the Real Economy Cooperative. However, the process of ordering ingredients through Real Economy did not always work in practice, as the Cooperative would need a week's notice for new orders. This meant that the Community Worker would often improvise with sourcing ingredients from

local shops, which would mean that the meal was not always completely organic and 'ethically' sourced.

Cooked on a wood-fire in the barrel barbeque (see Figure 51), the food would be ready for around 1pm – or at least, would aim to be ready for 1pm. And though the community food centre itself was a small group, lunch was a bigger community experience, as it was open to Sims Hill staff, those volunteering on Thursdays as part of a 'work-share', as well as other food growing projects on the site. This meant that the community food centre group often prepared lunch for up to 15 people, and those who were not directly working for Sims Hill would give a small monetary donation towards the cost of the food, or an in-kind donation, such as the salad donated by Edible Futures, which would be eaten as part of the meal. Following a relaxed lunch break and post-meal coffee, the group would resume their farm activities (or new ones) at about 2-2.30pm, finally finishing for the day between 3.30pm and 4pm, at which point the Community Worker would hand out bags of veg-shares to members who would then make their way home – predominantly by walking, cycling and public transport.

Figure 49: Harvesting and weeding in the polytunnels. (Photo from Sims Hill website).

Figure 50: Preparing lunch all together under the canopied seating area. (Photo by author).

Figure 51: Cooking on a wood fire. (Photo by author).

10.6 DOING FOOD AID DIFFERENTLY

> *"I think we will look back on the foodbank era and say, 'what on earth were we playing at?'" - Real Economy Founder*

In the following sections, I outline specific ways in which the community food centre approached food aid 'differently' – not just to a Trussell Trust food bank, but also to projects like FoodCycle, who use surplus food from shops and supermarkets to support vulnerable people. As I've mentioned earlier in this chapter, Real Economy designed the community food centre as a holistic response to food insecurity. And listening to the lessons from North America, they sought to provide regular access to fresh nutritious local food; build wellbeing and tackle social isolation through building community life at the site; and equip and empower people through learning how to grow food and cook informally, as well as enable people to question normative societal practices that were seen to exploit the food system and society more broadly.

10.6.1 RECIPROCITY

I first heard about the community food centre three months after I started data collection in the food banks and community kitchen. Their (former) Community Worker had come along to one of the FoodCycle meals in order to network, and she and I got talking about the project and what they do. Describing the centre as "not just an alternative to a food bank, but something completely different", she explained how it operated with the farm work and community meal, piquing my interest when she told me that reciprocity was a driving principle of the project and was what distinguished them from the food bank approach. This was particularly significant, as I had already started to pay attention to capacity for reciprocity in the food banks and community kitchen and how it impacted on service users' experiences – in particular, regarding feelings of shame and embarrassment – as well as highlighting distinct 'giver' and 'receiver' power dynamics. For many of the participants in my study, the prospect of receiving free food through a soup kitchen or food bank felt degrading and was equated to a lowering of social standards and personal failure, because it was seen as a 'handout'.

> *"...my parents were always good providers. How come I'm not sensible enough to do the same?...my parents were very proud, my dad would have never gone to a food bank. He would have turned round and said, 'I'd rather starve then go cap in hand to somebody because I can't sort it out myself'." – Jackie, food bank client*

> *"It's like, 'wow, look, here you are queueing up trying to get food, you know, why is that? What has happened, you were working more than 2 years back!', for me, it's a sign of a steady fall in, possible, almost standard?" – Ray, food bank & drop-in service client*

Real Economy saw simply giving people free food as having a potential for creating a negative emotional response and intentionally designed the project to subvert this outcome through the principle of reciprocity, which they believed would provide a dignified approach to food aid.

> *"...just giving out food, is about the least radical thing you can possibly imagine." – Real Economy Founder*

At the community food centre, members would perform reciprocity by contributing to the farm activities and the preparation of the community meal. This approach complemented the ethos of the CSA, as they essentially took a light-touch approach to the 'work-share' model that Sims Hill already offer to a small number of their members. And while the tasks were always straightforward and achievable – working around the changing needs and abilities within the group – they also added value to the work of the CSA (see Figure 52 & Figure 53).

Figure 52: Hanging string for green beans. (Photo by Community Food Centre Community Worker).

Figure 53: A Community Food Centre member preparing potato salad for lunch. (Photo by author).

This was significant, because it meant that members of the group were not 'receivers' of food aid from a hosting organisation, but were supporting the organisation, contributing towards growing the food that would eventually make it into their lunch and their veg shares.

"...It's good that you can like - especially if you start coming a lot - you can physically, like, you planted those lettuces today, we will get them back in our bags. Also, if people come for like 2-3 months, they do start to say like 'oh that's the stuff I physically planted' and it feels nice to get stuff that is just from a field over there. But it feels even better to get stuff that you know that you had a hand in putting in the ground. Being a part of." – Dan, CFC member

"I think there's a nicer, community element to it. You're not just receiving food but providing something to the community agriculture project as well." – Ian, CFC member

This subverted the 'feeling' of charity and associations of failure, because people provided their labour and time in return for the food – which was valued as a contribution towards the farm – and in doing so, enabled people to help themselves, which for many, in particular the men, became an empowering form of self-care. In addition, the model was already employed by members of the CSA who were involved on a 'work-share' basis, which also helped to reduce the distinction between paying members and those receiving food aid.

While the participation in farm work can be framed in terms of reciprocity and a dignified approach to food aid, it can also be framed as a wellbeing activity. As the tasks were always activities that could be completed on the day, supported the work of the CSA, and were flexible around the changing needs (physical and emotional) of the group. For example, on one particular week, I and two other members were up on stools tying string for green beans to climb up (see Figure 52), while two other members of the group who were less mobile, sat nearby cutting the string for us to use. It was a simple task that required communication and collaboration between members of the group and contributed to the running of the farm. For, in the following weeks, we could see the beans had already started to climb the string (see Figure 49**Error! Reference source not found.**). By planning tasks that the group were able to achieve in a short number of hours, the project sought to improve the health and wellbeing of the members by giving them a sense of purpose and achievement.

Interestingly, while the reciprocity model could be said to successfully address the stigma created through 'the handout', it also created an unexpected barrier to food. For example, one of the participants of the community food centre could not always attend because of other responsibilities – and would come along on an ad hoc basis, sometimes for only a couple of hours a day. This member had not been referred to the group because of food insecurity and unbeknownst to the Community Worker, their circumstances had changed over time and they were now experiencing food insecurity. However, this participant felt it would be unfair to the other members of the group if they were to also receive a veg share, because they were not able to contribute as much of their time to the farm. Consequently, they did not make their circumstances known, instead only requesting surplus from the farm when it was available.

> *"...over the winter [I] used to sort of drift in for a few*
> *hours...Sometimes [I] just came for lunch, and other people had*
> *been here all day and that seemed slightly unfair. So, [I] get [food]*
> *on a more ad hoc basis at the moment. Umm, yeah." – CFC*
> *member*

With their consent, I informed the Community Worker of their circumstances, who then ensured they had a veg share regardless of their contribution to farm work – stating that:

> *"...it's not a sort of capitalist system of, you need to work for your*
> *veg bag you need to have worked as hard as that person. You just*
> *need to be here really, and join in."*

This was significant because while I found that the exchange of time and labour for food worked to subvert the stigma of food aid, the community food centre approach to reciprocity was underpinned by an ethics of care rather than a market like for like exchange. However, it should be noted that this ethics of care was perhaps not communicated effectively, for it took my intervention to enable the member to access the required support.

10.6.2 FRESH FOOD

The quality of the food provided at the community food centre was of a very high standard. Described by one of the participants:

> *"The food is like a work of art – the quality, the colour, the texture*
> *of it all…the more I [eat] it, the more I realise how good it makes*
> *[me] feel." – Terry, CFC member*

The majority of food provided at the community food centre was fresh and organic produce that was grown on-site by Sims Hill Shared Harvest, and any cupboard goods used to supplement the community meal, were sourced through the Real Economy Cooperative. This meant that it was a significantly different food offer to the food banks and community kitchen, who relied on dried, ambient and/or processed food and food surplus in their respective models.

> *"…in the long-term people need fresh food for their own health*
> *and that's something that we wanted to be able to provide as an*
> *organisation" – Former Community Worker*

Research shows that experiences of food insecurity are associated with a multitude of health concerns (Thompson et al. 2018), and while food bank parcels might be acceptable (to a certain extent) as an emergency response to food insecurity when people are in crisis, they are nutritionally insufficient for people who rely on food parcels for longer periods of time - for example, when experiencing chronic and cyclical food insecurity[46]. Recognising that fresh produce can be expensive for people living on a very low income, Real Economy designed the community food centre model to enable long-term access to high quality fresh food, which would help improve the health and wellbeing of those experiencing food insecurity. This was significant because fresh produce was, and still is, the most sought-after form of food

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[46] Cyclical food insecurity is when people experience repeated food insecurity at certain points in the year/month – a good example of which would be the week leading up to payday.

support[47], and by providing this at the community food centre, they enabled members the opportunity to cook from scratch and have choice over what meals they made from the food, all the while providing nutrition through high quality organic produce.

Figure 54: Bright chard & one of the community meals. (Photo by author).

The founder of the community food centre in Bristol was charismatic, and by his own description, an idealistic person whose vision for the future of food aid had a significant impact on the way in which the project was run and on some of the longer-standing members of the group. He spoke persuasively about the challenges within our food and welfare systems, and believed passionately that we need to move away from the food banking and surplus food systems prolific in the treatment of food insecurity. Providing good quality fresh food was an ideological decision made in response to what he calls the 'myth of hunger', a phenomenon which has been created by separating off food insecurity from its context – poverty.

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[47] Physical food support – as cash-first approaches and even vouchers are often the most sought-after support giving access to food.

> *"...food insecurity has been, it's almost been, like, created as a category by the Trussell Trust...separated off from the whole complex nature of poverty itself - and vulnerability." – Real Economy Founder*

He explained that by compartmentalising 'food insecurity' and the food aid sector, the complexity of food insecurity and poverty – how it intersects with systemic financial drivers, physical and mental health, social isolation, place, housing, cooking facilities and infrastructure (among many other factors) – has been simplified and reduced to an issue of 'hunger'. This is important because food insecurity is then framed as a phenomenon that can be resolved by giving people food, and that any food will do, because people are hungry *now*.

> *"...the myth of hunger tends to play into the idea you must get food to people because they're desperately hungry, and any food will be great!" – Real Economy Founder*

According to the Real Economy founder, 'hunger' feeds the 'deserving and undeserving poor' rhetoric as outlined in the literature review. This is because it creates a scenario in which the expectation is, if someone is 'truly' in need, they will take whatever food they can get. An approach to food insecurity that can be critiqued for being reductionist and harmful, because it perpetuates and normalises a secondary food system where there is a lack of choice and the expectation of gratitude for what is 'given' for free, and where critique of whether that food is nutritionally, environmentally or culturally adequate and appropriate is often prevented for fear of being seen as 'ungrateful'. It is a powerful sentiment which I often heard from food bank clients themselves:

> *"We should not be picky with what we're given for free. If we're given something for free, we should be grateful and not be picky with it." – Hana, food bank client*

This is significant because it creates a power imbalance that positions food as a 'gift' rather than a 'right', which resonates with the discussion from the literature review and chapter 5 through the notion that those who are 'poor' are irresponsible, and

those in the position to *give* support are better equipped at making decisions – in this context, about what 'poor people' should be eating.

Projects like the community food centre challenged this framework by providing high quality fresh nutritious food to those experiencing food insecurity, while supporting them to develop knowledge and confidence to cook and prepare the food themselves through informal food education. This was driven by the belief that providing good food in this way can improve health, wellbeing and a sense of belonging.

> *"People in hardship should get the best food, is my ridiculously ideological idealist position." – Real Economy Founder*

Interestingly, while their approach still involves an element of the food aid provider *knowing* and *deciding* what people *should* be eating, the community food centre promoted the consumption of nutritious food and sought to enable members to go away and make meals with the food they took away from the site. In addition, by providing fresh produce that was not sourced from supermarket surplus – which was and is an increasingly popular approach to providing food support because of the perceived 'win-win' of reducing food waste and feeding people experiencing food insecurity (Caplan, 2017) – they disrupted the 'secondary consumer' market created by food banks and surplus food aid providers (Salonen, 2016). Because through their reciprocity model, the community food centre enabled members the opportunity to access primary consumer market goods.

10.6.3 INFORMAL EDUCATION AND 'REIMAGINING SOCIETY'

As I have mentioned, informal education was an important component to the community food centre. Through their everyday activities, members would learn about the food system, how to grow food and how to prepare and cook meals using the produce that had been grown on-site. Importantly, the approach to education was unlike the 'Eat Well Spend Less' cooking classes run by the Trussell Trust, as the learning that took place was informal, participatory and continuous. The Community Worker did not take a formalised 'teaching' approach to the learning, instead they

encouraged members to explore farming, cooking and preparing food slowly – to ask questions and to build up confidence through repetition over time. An approach that was made possible because of the community building approach, where people would engage over long periods of time. They would encourage members to make suggestions for what they would like to cook the following week and the community meals would give members' ideas for what they could do with the veg that they were given to take home. Supporting this approach, the produce was always seasonal, which meant that they would often cook with the same ingredients for several weeks, benefitting those who were learning to cook, as they would learn how to prepare various different meals with the same ingredients.

The informal approach was felt to be critical to the project because it gave people the space to learn but also ensured that the Community Worker did not make assumptions about members' knowledge and skill around cooking. As a result, members were able to learn at their own pace, and those who already knew how to cook could support those who were learning. As exemplified by a member of the group who had a lot of experience working with the land and cooking:

> *"It's quite a nice experience to bring people together in that way, and spend the time to be with the food, to show that this is how it grows, and this is what helps it grow, and this is how we cook it."*
> *– Rosie, CFC member*

However, there were members of the community food centre who were less taken with the approach. For example, one such member was critical of the informality around education as they would have liked to have had a certificate evidencing their learning around food growing – seeing this as a way in which the project could help 'upskill' their members.

> *"Okay, I go to what is probably the largest growing space for a community agriculture project in the city, and I pick up things from working in the polytunnels, but that doesn't go on my CV, that doesn't make me employable. That doesn't make me have a skill to be able to, I don't know, do a job in that area? I've been doing it for fifteen months; it'd be kind of nice." – Ian, CFC member*

The majority of members were unemployed or precariously employed on zero-hour contracts in low-paid roles. Consequently, this was an interesting critique of the project, for although much of the design of the CFC sought to empower its members, 'upskilling' would have been a valuable way of providing possibly far-reaching transitional support for those who wished to take this on.

For another member of the group, who had anxiety, the informality around preparing and cooking food – which was designed to give members the opportunity to choose what food they made and how – was a stressful experience, and they would have preferred to be told precisely what to do, when and how. In their experience, having 'choice' at lunchtime did not feel like an empowering experience, but could actually become a period of tension within the day.

Figure 55: A member of the CFC's child participating in preparing lunch. (Photo by author).

Aside from the everyday learning that took place through activity, Real Economy sought to empower the members of the community food centre through monthly

talks at the site, set around the objective of 'reimagining society'. Guest speakers would be invited to come along and share their work and worldview, and many of the discussion topics were established by asking community food centre members what they wanted to know more about. Explaining how this works:

> *"Once a month they have a conversation about food and the food system, or reimagining society more generally. Quite a radical perspective that's designed to help people - alienated people - reintegrate into society and have a sense that we can actually make change - together." – Real Economy Founder*

> *"...they usually do some kind of activity involved too, so open up opportunity for everyone to have their voice heard and discuss." – Former Community Worker*

They were designed to be 'aspirational' in content and were primarily focused on issues pertaining to the food system and how it could function in a more socially and environmentally just way. They created space for members of the community food centre to be involved in focused discussion on ways in which change could be brought about by working together.

> *"...it's designed not as a lecturey (sic) kind of talk, but as a group discussion. That sort of fits the ethos of how this place works. That this is something we do that is very communal, we're doing everything together." – Dan, CFC member*

'Togetherness', informality and exploration were promoted in the community food centre to create connections between members as well as the wider community at the site, and to help people feel that they are listened to, and to feel positive about their capacity as a community or as an individual to create change. Reflecting on the talks, I was told that these discussions had an impact on members' consumption patterns:

> *"I think I appreciate food as a living thing now, seeing it grow and working it…Learning about what's going in – that's the biggest thing I've got out of it. From the professional growers and the nutritionists that come there I've learnt to be more careful, about eating better and away from pesticides, insecticides, GMO – I'm more aware of that now." – Terry, CFC member*

But they could also be exclusionary for some members of the group:

> *The Community Worker asked the group today if they think that the talks should continue. While some members say that they've found them interesting, a member of the group exclaims: "didn't you ever notice how I would do the washing up when they were talking, so that I didn't have to listen?". (Fieldnotes 24th May 2018)*

Despite being described as a core part of the community food centre model, during the months that I conducted research, only one of these monthly talks took place. This was because the former Community Worker, who had been leading on this project, left, and with the handover, this had yet to be picked up again. Due to limited funding, the new Community Worker was employed for fewer hours a week, and prioritised other parts of the project, highlighting an issue with the sustainability of the model.

Generally speaking, the everyday conversation at the site had an impact on the ways that members perceived the food that they ate – particularly with regards to its supply route and source.

> *"...having access to fresh seasonal organic, low food-mile food, does help in terms of nutrition, and particularly in terms of the vitamins and minerals in the content of the food being very very good, good quality food." – Ian, CFC member*
>
> *"[Q: What do you think of the food?] Very nice! It's healthier for my stomach… If I eat supermarket stuff, sometimes my stomach feels not very nice afterwards. But when I eat this stuff from the farm it's alright." – Jamie, CFC member*
>
> *"Obviously it tastes, like, you've seen the beetroots, it just tastes incredible! You wouldn't be able to get anything like that in a supermarket..." – Dan, CFC member*

Unsurprisingly, everyday conversation at the centre would often come back to food, growing and wider discussion about unjust food systems. In particular conversation would lean towards the impact of supermarket dominance on the environment and

workers' rights – a subject that was often discussed over lunch with the various farm workers on site (many of whom were heavily involved in the Landworkers' Alliance[48]). The community lunch meant that members and workers from the site would encounter others who they might not have socialised with in other contexts. This led to further informal learning – not just about food systems, but also about each other's lives – which was enabled through the informal connections and friendships that were developed over various meals. But it should also be noted that members of the CFC participated in conversation more than others.

> *"It seems like...the ones who come and don't talk to a lot of people when they're here are the ones who seem to not end up coming that much. It's the ones who come and you can engage with them, and they seem to stick around more." – Dan, CFC Member*

And as a small group, the degree to which people feel comfortable to participate in conversation could impact on the likelihood of their returning.

10.6.4 SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

> *We made pesto, pasta and salad today. The pesto was partly made using seasonal ingredients, and included: Sunflower seeds, Olive oil, Nettles, Wild garlic leaves, Yeast flakes (instead of parmesan), Salt, Lemon juice and Parsley. After working in smaller groups on the main field in the morning the group gathered back together to prepare the lunch. As we start to prepare the pesto [the Community Worker] realised that the hand blender she'd brought along to make the pesto won't work because she left the metal blade at home! This wasn't a problem for long though, as to remedy this, Terry broke up the sunflower seeds using a tea towel and mallet, while the rest of us concentrated on cutting the leaves and other ingredients up really small so that they can be used in the pesto. The pasta also had purple sprouting broccoli, onion, and wilted spinach in it. While the salad had radishes, beetroot, carrot and salad leaves. It was so colourful. When the farm workers joined for the meal everyone was commenting on how tasty the pesto was - it was my first experience of making it with wild garlic and it was delicious! (Field notes 26th April 2018)*

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[48] The Landworkers' Alliance is "a union of farmers, growers, foresters and land-based workers with a mission to improve the livelihoods of our members and create a better food and land-use system for everyone." (Landworkers' Alliance, 2021)

Figure 56: Preparing and eating wild garlic pesto. (Photos by Community Worker & author).

Social isolation, a sense of disconnection from society and poor mental health are often related and compounding issues associated with food insecurity (All Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger, 2018; Martin et al., 2016; Pourmotabbed et al., 2020). Acknowledging this, one of the key objectives of the community food centre was the 'build community life'. This was where Real Economy thought that the project could have long-lasting and far-reaching impact on the lives of those who attended and on chronic vulnerability. Real Economy's Founder believed that there has been a breakdown in the "*hierarchy of responsibility*" within society – across family, community and government. Understanding that the community food centre had little scope for affecting family life, or government policy – which "*wants to be particularly tough on benefits and social security in general*" – Real Economy's Founder believed that building community solidarity could have the potential for rebuilding a safety net for some. In many ways, a grassroots 'Big Society' perspective.

Commenting on their reasons for going to the project, members of the community food centre stated:

> *"I think it's social support, I think it's being part of a community, being part of a group, being, yeah. Having regular contact with the same people…" – Ian, CFC member*

> *"[It's] the friendships with the nice people that are there, and the new ones that keep starting." – Jamie, CFC member*

> *"...though I didn't, like, come here for my own wellbeing. I know now that if I were to stop coming, that it would actually have a negative impact on my wellbeing…So yeah, that's a kind of side effect of coming." – Dan, CFC member*

Similarly, the Community Worker also commented on the value of community for drawing people back to the project:

> *"I think it's a more powerful reason for why people come back [than just food]. Umm, in terms of a feedback loop I think that speaks to your brain more powerfully of like, 'oh I can go and see nice people and then I can leave, and I'll feel better about myself'"*

Importantly, the community created at the site was not just between the members of the group, but was across Sims Hill, Avon Wildlife Trust and other food growing businesses. This was most notable at lunchtime, when members of these organisations would join the community food centre and share the meal that the group had prepared. Socialising together as part of the wider Feed Bristol community.

> *"Umm, I guess it is literally, it's a community, it does feel like we are a little community. Not just [the group members], but sort of everyone on the site…we all share together a meal quite often. It feels like this whole Feed Bristol thing is, that we're a little community nested in a slightly larger community of everyone who comes up here. So, it's nice, and it's nice to see…" – Dan, CFC member*

Building and welcoming people into a supportive community was also a way of subverting the undignified and stigmatising experience of going to a food aid 'service'. For by approaching food insecurity as a community building project, the community food centre was not identifiable as a 'food aid' service in the same way as a food bank.

> *"One of the models that is out there at the moment, is to do the traditional foodbank and then graft on advice agencies in addition, and that's okay, but for me it's treating people in a way that's simplistic. As if they're a problem to be fixed. I think, if we were to treat people with the sort of dignity they deserve, we need to recognise the complexity of chronic vulnerability, as I've said, and work to reintegrate people into a supportive community." – Real Economy Founder*

By providing food aid in this way – through building a supportive community – the community food centre was a space where people were able to open up and discuss problems that they were having on their own terms and in their own time. Interestingly, it would often be over a cup of tea in the morning, or whilst weeding or preparing veg at lunchtime – essentially, when participating in a repetitive and simple activity. Where each person is participating - collaborating as peers - and where the confrontation of eye contact, often associated with an interview type structure (e.g., with a Jobcentre work coach), was eliminated. I found this had a calming effect on participants, who did not feel they had to justify why they were there.

> *"...we would have great long discussions in the polytunnels, or whilst we were pruning back bushes, umm and I think that was a really great way of getting to know somebody. You know, outdoors in a field, in the rain, with a pair of shears, because you feel more liberated about what you can talk about, and what you can't." – Ian, CFC member*

I found that activity also contributed to the making of community in the CFC regardless of whether or not someone shared personal information, or indeed talked at all. For it was a sharing of purpose and was conducted together. For example,

whether it was weeding, or sharing a meal, participating in the same action instilled a form of being in it together.

> *We were weeding between the onions on the field today. I find it a really satisfying activity, it's repetitive, which means I don't have to concentrate too much on what I'm doing and can have a good chat. I was working next to Ian and as we were weeding, he started off talking about something that had been bothering him that week, but then the conversation moved on and he ended up telling me all about his childhood and the adventures he used to get up to when he was younger. While we were working on our knees, another member of the group who has a problem with their back was hoeing the weeds instead. The only thing was, they kept mistaking the onions for weeds and digging them up! It was quite funny, even though a bit detrimental to the farm. The Community Worker ended up spending the entire morning session working alongside them, chatting and helping with the weeding. (Field notes 28th June 2018)*

Integral to the supportive community that was cultivated in the group, was the knowledge that it was a 'safe space' to share personal experiences, to ask questions and to try new things. However, a safe space can be different for different people, or even depending on what their state of mind is at the time. Many of those who participated in the group struggled with their mental health, and the presence of a Community Worker who had experience of support work helped to ensure a feeling of safety. For example, gathering together in the morning for a cup of tea or coffee was an incredibly important part of the day, because it was where each of the members of the group would touch base, and if people were having a hard time, it was an opportunity for them to share this with the Community Worker and even the wider group at times. If someone were to disclose something to the Community Worker, they would not share this information with the wider group but would ensure that the group were aware if someone was struggling – for example, if they were not in a place to talk much – so that members could be conscientious of this.

Reflecting on the group dynamics, the Community Worker told me that 'balance' was key to maintaining community:

"I think it works better when we have a balance. Maybe some people are in a more stable place in their life. I can already see that at play with some people who have, like more experience of working in the system giving advice to other people who haven't got so much experience, people who are educated - people who don't have so much education. Just helping each other out." – Community Worker

The community food centre was not designed to support people who had high support needs – or at least only support people with high support needs. This was partly due to the nature of the setting and the farm activities, but also due to the fact that the Community Worker was the only employed member of staff leading the group. With one Community Worker alone, capacity was stretched, and to ensure a safe environment for those who attended, they relied on members supporting one another. Resonating with the Community Worker's comments, I found that having people at different stages of need created this balance but also naturally lent to the development of community solidarity, where members of the group would support one another.

Figure 57: Examining the weeds in between the onions. (Photo by author).

10.6.5 THE SPACE

Unlike the community kitchen and food banks, which were based inside buildings in inner-city and densely populated urban areas. The community food centre was on the outskirts of East Bristol in an area surrounded by parks and green spaces, and the

activities almost always took place outside – or at least in a polytunnel. This meant that it attracted people who were comfortable and healthy enough to be outside, not to mention those who also had the time to be spending almost an entire working day at the site. As the Community Worker stated, this meant that:

> *"We're not really a community centre because usually that means that you attract people from the local community – we're more of a food community, because we've created a community around it."*

Because of where it was situated, the community food centre could be difficult to get to. For example, from where I lived in Easton, it was a 15-minute bike ride - mainly through Eastville park - but it was also a similar length car journey because of the high amount of traffic in that area of the city. Travelling to the site via public transport was a little trickier, for though there were regular bus routes, public transport in Bristol tends to run through the city centre. This meant that for members travelling from North and South Bristol, the journey could sometimes take up to, or over an hour to reach the site. This would have also created another barrier for accessing the project, as although Real Economy reimbursed bus fare – they only did so for the first few weeks. This meant that to attend the project, members were required to have the resources to afford the bus fare in the first place, or have the means to run a car, or own a bicycle.

While the location of the site may have been a barrier to access for some, for others, the journey to get there and the striking contrast of the environment with their everyday lives provided a release – a form of escapism.

> *"It's relaxing - because it's outdoors and it's wellbeing"* – Ian, CFC member
>
> *"There's something about being in nature that is good for people, it touches the soul."* – Terry, CFC member
>
> *"It's relaxing. I find the city very – so, I grew up in the countryside, and I find the city, just the essence of it quite – it doesn't make me happy. When I walk around where we live, umm, this is a place, especially today, because I haven't been here for two weeks, it just seems to have bloomed in that period. Err, and I guess I sort of*

forgot about what it looked like last summer. It's just sort of uplifting…" – Dan, CFC member

Key elements of the community food centre, which promoted wellbeing, were made possible because of the physical environment. The site was expansive and peaceful (despite the background hum of the M32) and was a space where people could be outside, take part in physical activity in order to grow food, build physical connection with nature by putting their hands in the soil, eat nutritious food grown on-site, and build a sense of belonging through place-making.

"In terms of how I feel, I feel quite harmonious when I've got my hands in the dirt, and I'm picking the food that I'm going to eat. I feel like it's a really nice, natural like, yeah...just a good thing to do, and resonates well with that feeling, and it feels like that's what I'm supposed to be doing really." – Rosie, accessed all sites

Though they did not describe their approach to me in this way, much of the community food centre's work to increase wellbeing resonated with principles of social and therapeutic horticulture, which is "the process of using plants and gardens to improve physical and mental health, as well as communication and thinking skills" (Thrive, 2021). The simplicity of nature, and the tasks assigned were for many, a welcome relief or removal from a somewhat chaotic urban life.

Figure 58: Getting our hands in the soil. (Photo by author).

10.7 SUSTAINABILITY AND IMPACT OF THE PROJECT

In this chapter, I have reflected on specific ways in which the community food centre approached food aid 'differently' to the other sites that I explore in this thesis, and in particular, to the food bank model. While members of the project generally responded well to the way it functioned, benefitting from increased access to fresh and nutritious food as well increased health and wellbeing from the environment and social connection, it is important to recognise that there were fundamental issues with the sustainability and impact of the approach. Principally, in reference to the financial viability of the project and the model with which food aid was provided.

10.7.1 FINANCIAL VIABILITY OF THE PROJECT

While the food provided at the community food centre was *environmentally* sustainable because of the permaculture principles and short supply chains used to grow and source food. I found that the project itself – as a model of food aid – was not *financially* sustainable, which was due to the high cost of the organic produce, and the difficulty generating enough profit through Real Economy's Trading Arm to support the community food centres. As a consequence, the project relied heavily on grant funding, which, in a climate of austerity, was highly sought after. This presented a problem because although the project was well received by all those involved, only a small number of people were being supported by the intervention. This meant that in comparison to other models of food aid that had the scope to reach higher numbers of people at a lower cost (e.g., food banks, or those using supermarket surplus), the community food centre required higher investment for lower potential impact – not an attractive proposal in a climate of high competition for grant funding. 'Good food' – in this context, fresh organic produce – costs money, which is why the use of surplus food has increased significantly during a time of high need and austerity – it is simply more 'sustainable' as a model of support. This highlights the paradox of sustainability within the food aid sites I explored – for the more environmentally sustainable you try to make a project, the less financially viable it becomes.

When Sims Hill dropped off the weekly food shares to their collection points across the city, there would be surplus food leftover, which they would bring back to the site. To try and make the funding go further, the Community Worker started to use this surplus food in the community meals a couple of months after I started data collection. Essentially 'leftovers', this food would then be repurposed into the community meal. The Community Worker presented the use of this food to the group, not just as a way to save money, but as a way to 'help out' the farm and reduce food waste. Resonating with Cappellini et al.'s (2013) research on family, thrift and 'leftovers', the acceptance and use of this surplus further marked the group as part of the Sims Hill community and not just the community food centre:

> *"...it is the thrifty table, rather than the more hospitable one, that implies a deeper level of inclusion: being part of the family and sharing in the everyday saving of resources. Family members are expected to participate in the everyday household sacrifice of saving resources during mealtimes: it marks a level of intimacy and reaffirms family membership. The very process of sacrifice also marks a level of intimacy and inclusion within the family unit that may only be shared by family members or close friends."*
> *(Cappellini & Parsons, 2013, p. 130)*

This was because they were supporting Sims Hill at the same time as supporting the community food centre by participating in this 'sacrifice' for the greater good of the group and the CSA. This could also be viewed as a form of self-care, because it was in their interest to ensure that the project was able to continue for as long as possible.

10.7.2 THE FOOD AID MODEL

The Community Food Centre originally promoted itself as an 'alternative' to a food bank, yet it relied upon members being able to travel to the site from across the city and be available for almost the entire working day. This meant that the model of food aid was inappropriate for those who were time-poor, had caring responsibilities, or had to spend time job-hunting because of the conditionality of JSA (among other factors).

> *"I think it's a really close ally, but it's not a replacement, it's not ideal for most people in crisis who don't have the time and the energy to be putting in a whole day of work." - Community Worker*

Indeed, while the project enabled people to be able to access vouchers to Real Economy's online cooperative to buy cupboard staples (as an alternative to the supermarket donations in a food bank), in reality, very few people took up the offer. This was because the process of actually purchasing food through the site required significant planning, coordination, and money. To give a little context, the vouchers could be used against the cost of the online shop, but the food would not be delivered to the member's home, it would have to be collected from a local Real Economy collection point (which were not available in every neighbourhood of the city) and

ordered a week in advance. In addition, because the cooperative sourced ethical, local and predominantly organic food, the cost of the produce was far higher than in a local shop or supermarket, let alone an affordable supermarket such as Aldi or Lidl. This meant that people would not be able to afford as much with their vouchers as they could with the equivalent money in a supermarket. Talking about this with the Community Worker and CFC members, it was felt that an alternative approach could be to sell staple items on-site, where members of the group could use these vouchers in the first few weeks of the project at the same time as receiving fresh produce.

While the project supported people to develop confidence and wellbeing, there was also a risk of creating dependency on the food provided, because it enabled people to access food for free as part of a light-touch work-share programme, without directly supporting people to improve their financial circumstances, or access food in a sustainable way outside of the project. As I've noted already, one of the members was keen to formalise some sort of process of 'upskilling' in order to support people to get employment, but while this was not part of the community food centre model, Real Economy did initially design the project to work collaboratively with Sims Hill to transition people over from their light-touch work, to a Sims Hill 'work-share'. However, this was not necessarily communicated effectively with the CSA, and during the time that I conducted research, only one work-share place became available.

> *"Our original aim was to move people onto doing a work-share at Sims Hill...that's a good idea in theory, but in practice it doesn't really work because their workshare quota is already filled? So, they can't really accept anymore. So, it doesn't - it's not really a smooth transition process." – Former Community Worker*

Furthermore, some members of the project would not have been able to take on the workshare because they valued the extra support that they received in the community food centre and it would also have required a more significant contribution of labour than what they would have experienced.

CONCLUSION

Examining the everyday of the community food centre, I found that there were significant benefits and challenges to this 'different' model of food aid. Through their emphasis on participation and reciprocity they were able to subvert many of the power imbalances at play in the other food aid sites explored in this thesis, and were able to provide food that people were able to make meals from, took pleasure in, and which they had been involved in growing. Centering around participation and 'togetherness', the project was able to develop a 'food community' at the Feed Bristol site, and this helped to holistically address issues associated with food insecurity, such as building confidence and improving wellbeing. However, it is important to note that this focus on participation also had the potential for creating feelings of discomfort – particularly for those who experienced anxiety.

There were also challenges that came from trialling an alternative food aid model outside of the food bank or food surplus structure. In particular, significant time, energy and financial resources were invested in the community food centre – both in terms of the management of the project, and for those participating. For example, the members had to travel to the site, often by bus, invest their energy in working the land and growing food, and were required to spend the entire day at the site, which limited who would be able to participate – a model that was particularly challenging for those who were time-poor, or had severe health conditions. While for those running the project, it required time for planning and coordinating activities that were inclusive and tailored to the needs of the group, and financial investment in staffing and the cost of food. Challenges that highlighted the reasons why environmentally unsustainable approaches to food aid – such as the food bank, or food surplus models – continue to dominate the food aid sector where funding opportunities are scarce.

In the next and final empirical chapter, I explore the ways in which people 'get by' using these sites of food aid in amongst other forms of support and thrift tactics.

11. 'GETTING BY' WITH THRIFT AND RELATIONAL RESOURCES

In my first empirical chapter, 'The System is Broken', I explored structural drivers of food insecurity and food aid use, illustrating challenges within the current welfare system, and the vulnerable position from which people often have to navigate when they are unable to access the security of full-time, permanent and well-paid employment. The following chapters then explored the 'everyday' of three food aid sites responding to this precarity in East Bristol. In this chapter, I build on these stories and explore the everyday ways in which people resist and reside within this precarity, highlighting the active nature of 'getting by' and making do when resources are limited. Looking specifically at 'food provisioning' and 'utilisation of resources' (in the home), I explore the ways in which food aid interacts with personal circumstance (employment, health, housing and caring responsibilities), practices (thrift), and other forms of support (family, friends). In doing so, I show how decision-making is often motivated by financial necessity and wrought with an ethics of care – for the self, family, distant others, and the environment.

11.1 AGENCY, THRIFT AND RELATIONAL RESOURCES

In writing about decision-making, I find Lister's (2004) work on agency especially helpful. Describing four ways in which agency is exercised in poverty – 'getting by', 'getting out', 'getting organised' and 'getting (back) at'; she explains that individuals may practice each form of agency in different contexts. In this chapter (and indeed, thesis) I focus on the 'everyday' experience of food insecurity, which I found - for the participants in this study - revolved around 'getting by'. As Lister states, 'getting by' is a form of agency which, "can all too easily be taken for granted and not recognised as an expression of agency" (Lister, 2004, p. 130). However, by examining practices such as resource management, one can reveal how agency is practiced even in such constrained circumstances.

In order to discuss agency and resource management in 'getting by' – which in this context refers to food provisioning and the utilisation of resources – I draw on research that has explored 'thrift' as ordinary or mundane practice (Cappellini &

Parsons, 2013, 2014; Holmes, 2019; Miller, 1998). Described as "the art of doing (more) with less (money)" (Evans, 2011, p. 552), the purpose of thrift is to optimise consumption opportunities through careful and purposeful use of resources (Evans, 2011; Cappellini et al., 2014; Miller, 1998; Holmes, 2019). It is said to underpin the vast majority of everyday consumption (Evans, 2011; referencing Miller, 2001), which, in the context of food insecurity was certainly the case, as it was a common and often crucial practice employed by my participants. Often described as a cyclical process of, "spending to save and saving to spend" (Evans, 2011, p. 552), thrift is as much about 'saving' money to 'spend' at a later date, as it is about saving resources by spending *more* – a good example of which is bulk buying products at the supermarket in order to reduce the overall cost of individual items (Miller, 1998). But importantly, thrift is not just practiced at the point of purchase, it is also found in 'exhausting' value from resources that are already in one's possession (Holmes, 2019), as seen in the careful use of fuel, repurposing of leftovers (Cappellini & Parsons, 2013), or the repairing and patching of bed sheets (Holmes, 2019). Considering this terminology, 'exhausting' is an appropriate word to use here, because the practice of thrift also requires skill, knowledge, time and effort to perform (Cappellini, 2014; Miller, 1998; Holmes, 2019).

In this chapter, I seek to expand this understanding of resource and framing of thrift in order to capture the relational experience of 'getting by' when experiencing food insecurity. Because, for participants in this study, thrift was not just about the careful use of their own resources at the point of purchase, and in the home, but was also about purposefully accessing and utilising the resources that were *available* to them. By which I mean the resources shared, borrowed, lent and exchanged within friendships and family networks – what Lister (2004) describes as 'social resources'; in the natural resources accessible through lesser-known practices such as foraging and scrumping; and of course, through accessing wider community resources of food aid. The availability and accessibility of these relational resources had a significant impact on experiences of food insecurity. For example, they can provide participants with additional resources, some of which are utilised in thrift practices in the home, transforming into personal resources. Other times, the ways in which people engage with relational resources – in particular, food aid – resembles the practice of thrift while shopping. In many ways we can see accessing relational resources as a thrift

activity in itself, because by sourcing food or money in this way, participants were able to do more consumption with less – in this circumstance *no* – money, supporting them to 'save' their existing personal resources (e.g., food, money, fuel) for further acts of consumption.

Still, the practice of thrift is not simply relational because of the physical movement of material resources, but in what the movement and utilisation of resources enables or represents, ethically and morally (Evans, 2011; Holmes, 2019). For example, like Miller (1998) found, many of the participants in this study practiced thrift as a way of 'saving' resources in order to 'spend' them on family, illustrating that motivations behind thrift activities are not simply financially driven, but are often shaped by care and love for others. Further to this, in her study of contemporary thrift, Holmes (2019) found that thrift not only reveals care for one's family but also care for the self, for distant others and the environment. Referring to this as 'conscience', Holmes (2019) finds that there are three key motivations for practicing thrift – 'financial necessity', 'conscience' and 'enjoyment'. Calling this the 'constellation of thrift', Holmes (2019) finds that the practice of thrift is an active process, not just because of the labour involved, but because of the decision-making required. For these motivations, "overlap, intersect and compete" (p. 132) with one another depending on personal circumstance and context, which requires people to make 'trade-offs' between different motivations and the value they are deemed to elicit. 'Trade-offs' which are present even under constrained circumstances.

Conversely, it is important to recognise that agency is present in the decision *not* to practice thrift too, where other factors come into play which compete with the desire to be thrifty – such as time, choice, convenience and even care (Holmes, 2019). With this in mind, in writing this chapter about the ways that people 'get by' when experiencing food insecurity, it is important to recognise that there is a danger in how we talk and think about agency. For example, in her research on poverty, Lister (2004, p. 125) found that there is a:

> *"...fine line between acknowledgement of the agency of people in poverty, including their capacity to make mistakes and 'wrong' decisions like the rest of us, and blaming them for their poverty".*

Similarly, there is a risk of romanticising or idealising agency in a way that brings contempt upon those who do not manage to 'get out' of or 'get by' in poverty, "thereby aggravating feelings of failure and shame (Greener, 2002)" (Lister, 2004, p. 125). And while the circumstances in which people did *not* practice thrift are perhaps beyond the scope of this chapter, I found that, like Lister, participants who did not practice thrift often experienced poor mental health which created a significant barrier to the practice, due to depression, low motivation and lack of energy - even when they had the knowledge of practices that could save them money, and the skills required to achieve this. In some circumstances, skills and knowledge were also lacking, but the guilt or shame associated with *not* practicing thrift were evident – as this quote articulates:

> *"I should be able to put food in the cupboard, even if I'm struggling with money, I should be able to provide some money and put some provision by to get some food. You know, and you feel stupid because you think, well, I'm a grown woman, I should be able to manage my money better, and I should be able to provide." – Jackie, food bank client*

For this participant, the experience of food insecurity was compounded by poor mental and physical health which severely impacted their motivation and capacity, and manifested in feelings of shame and guilt at not being able to provide for themselves.

At this stage, I think it is important to note that in talking about agency within the context of food insecurity, I do not seek to perpetuate behavioural explanations of poverty – my intention could not be further from this. Instead, what I hope to do in this chapter, is illustrate the ways in which people assert agency within the constraints of socio-economic structures, which hold them in a position of precarity, in ways that enable them to 'get by' and make do; highlighting everyday moments of decision-making, which have been underexplored in the literature on food insecurity. In doing so, I aim to articulate how 'getting by' when experiencing food insecurity – by which I mean ensuring participants and their loved ones have enough to eat – is

hard work, and is greatly influenced by geography and support networks, as well as housing, health, knowledge and know-how.

11.2 FOOD PROVISIONING

In this section, food provisioning refers to any practices which involve sourcing food prior to the act of consumption in the home. For example, it includes shopping, accessing food aid, sourcing food through friends and family, and accessing food in other, more resourceful ways, such as foraging and in-kind labour. While food provisioning is often discussed in terms of bringing food back to the home, I also include meals that are consumed on sites of food aid and through support from friends and family – exploring how people use the food taken *away* from these food aid sites (as well as items sourced via family and friends) in the next section.

11.2.1 FOOD AID

Exploring three different models of food aid, I found that people used different types of food provision depending on their circumstances (health, housing, time), the type of food on offer, how the food was delivered, as well as their knowledge or awareness of the provision in the first place.

For example, the food bank was primarily accessed by people who had housing, as the food distributed required people to be able to cook, or prepare a meal, and at the very least required recipients to have a kettle. The prevalence of fuel poverty amongst clients led the food bank I volunteered in to offer a version of their food parcel comprised solely of ingredients that could be eaten from the tin or were quick to heat up, like super noodles – parcels that have elsewhere been referred to as 'kettle food bags' (Caraher & Furey, 2018, p. 12). However, relatively few people requested such items, perhaps because they did not know that this was on offer. Instead, I found that those who were homeless or vulnerably housed – like George in 'The System is Broken' – were more likely to attend sites like the community kitchen, or drop-in centres, where they could source and eat meals provided on-site. There were plenty of similar 'free food places' across Central and East Bristol and I found that some guests at the community kitchen would navigate these services as an everyday way of getting by, going to different drop-in sites depending on the day of the week.

Importantly, this thrift tactic required an intricate knowledge of support available, including smaller 'hidden' forms of food aid often offered through church-based sites (Haddow, 2021).

Interestingly, I found that patterns of 'shopping around' – a thrift tactic commonly practiced by those in Miller's (1998) study– were found in the ways that people used food aid, and on a number of occasions, people even described accessing resources through these sites as, 'like shopping'. Reflecting the ways in which people accessed drop-in meals as an everyday way of making do, participants would also frequent different sites of food aid to pick up food throughout the week to take home and cook.

> *"It's a weekly thing - it's like doing me shopping every week, you know I go there, and I go there. And everyone's really nice, and kind, and you know, friendly and stuff. It's alright." – Michael, community kitchen guest*
>
> *"Umm, I go to the [food plus], umm, and I sometimes go to the [drop-in church], and here really. That makes up my weekly shop." – Nicky, community kitchen guest*

But unlike shopping in shops and supermarkets, these participants 'shopped around' in order to obtain different items, and different types of food on offer to use at home, which required excellent knowledge of services, where they were located, how to get there, and what they provided. Importantly, where these participants were frequenting food aid services on a regular basis, they were sometimes replacing additional support that might ordinarily have been accessed via friends and family, but more significantly, they were using the food aid sites as a preventative measure – to avoid falling into crisis as an everyday way of food provisioning to get by.

There were different degrees to which people did this, as some participants would come along to a project once a week to save a little money by having a communal meal, and others would go to various sites, sourcing food to take home and eat on a long-term basis from sites such as the community kitchen and the community food centre. In the case of the food bank, participants most often accessed the food bank

during a crisis, but it was also used strategically as a preventative measure over longer periods of time – as a way of averting 'absolute hunger' (May et al., 2020).

> *"So, if I went to the foodbank, I'd probably hold a bit of money back and then think, 'right, I've got this, I've got this, what can I make?' Then I can go and get some mincemeat, I can go and get a bit of chicken and cook that up do a curry... you know?" – Leanne, food bank client*

As the quote above illustrates, one of my participants tactically 'holds money back' in order to see what meals she could make after going to the food bank and make proper meals for her children – what she describes as a hot meal, more substantial than beans on toast.

Time, health and the type of food available also had a significant impact on which food aid site was accessed. For example, for those who were time-poor – in this study, parents and those who were precariously employed – I found that, like the referral pathways which I have discussed in earlier chapters, the time food aid sites were open, and the level of time commitment they required, had an impact on use. This was particularly the case for the community food centre because it required participation for almost an entire working day. Indeed, two of the participants in this study who attended the community food centre for a few weeks, told me that they had to stop going because of work commitments. The precarity of their circumstances were such that they could not turn down the offer of labour - despite the fact that each of these job offers were in themselves precarious, as both were temporary, part-time, zero-hour contracts. For these individuals, accessing the food bank was far less time-consuming, as people would often be in and out within fifteen minutes. However, food banks were open only during working hours, which limits access to those experiencing in-work poverty (Caraher & Furey, 2018), and in the case of the Friday session at St Mark's Road, clashed with the school run. In between the food bank and the community food centre was the community kitchen, and though this was open on a Saturday and in a highly popular community site, it was still open during the day rather than the evening, which would have had an impact on who could attend; the meal was served halfway into the afternoon – on average from

2.30-4pm – which did not align with a typical mealtime[49]; and all other services that usually operate from the site were closed at the weekend, which meant that awareness of the provision within the local community was low. In addition to these limiting factors, the project only really advertised their service online via social media, which limited the scope of who came across the provision.

Similarly, the location of food aid sites had an impact on their use. Some areas of the city, particularly in Easton and Central Bristol are home to a number of food aid providers, clustered within a mile radius of each other. This means that for those in these inner-city areas, geographical access is not necessarily an issue. For example, living in central Bristol, Matthew states:

> *"You've got so much stuff. The only way you can go hungry in Bristol is if you are lazy. But if you're willing to walk 5, 10 minutes there is always somewhere you can pop in and have a meal and you'll be alright." – Matthew, food bank client*

Whereas, for participants I interviewed who accessed sites in East and Central Bristol, but who lived elsewhere in the city, this assurance of food support within 5-10 minutes was not the case, and often required a long bus or car journey – if money permitted. Further to this, poor health and the type of food on offer had an impact and I encountered many people who turned down food at the food bank because the weight of the bags would be too much for them to carry home if they had physical health conditions – and/or lived far away and could not afford public transport.

Indeed, the consideration of health and wellbeing impacted on which food aid sites would be accessed in ways that can be viewed of as self-care. For example, I found a surprisingly high number of people in this study were diabetic and chose to access sites that provided food that was healthy, nutritious and low in sugar.

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[49] It should be noted that since reopening after the COVID-19 closures in 2020, the community kitchen has moved the opening time earlier, to be more in line with a typical lunch time. In response to feedback from guests and Project Leaders about project improvements.

"...the food, I couldn't really eat it in my condition. Cause that's when I found out I have type 2 and that." – Michael, community kitchen guest

One of the members is overweight and diabetic and talks about how coming to the Community Food Centre has meant that her sugar levels are decreasing. 'They're still high, but my nurse said to keep doing whatever it is I'm doing because it's definitely reducing'. (Fieldnotes 29th March 2018)

Having choice in what is consumed was particularly important for those who had health conditions that required them to follow a certain diet. Participants described having to stop going to certain places because of the lack of 'healthy' options, and in contrast to those sites, the community kitchen and community food centre were seen positively because of the high quantity of vegetables included in the meals, and the high quantity of fresh produce available to take home.

"...somewhere like this enables me to eat better food, better quality umm you know, also better meals. When you open the fridge and it's not so bare, it doesn't look like you're so desolate." – Nicky, community kitchen guest

But importantly, food is something to be enjoyed, and in the community kitchen and community food centre people often commented on how tasty the food was, as well as how they enjoyed the experience of being there. These particular sites promoted wellbeing through practices such as commensality (Dunbar, 2017; Smith, 2021), cooking, and gardening, which were enjoyable and productive activities that helped to build community and a sense of solidarity – as Dunbar (2017, p. 198) states: "the causal direction runs from eating together to bondedness rather than the other way around". Like commensality, the act of gardening, cooking or prepping food together also evoked this bondedness as I evidenced in chapters 0 & 0.

"...it's nice to come here and just have a little social. Nice to remember that other people are going through these things too, in their own ways." - Kunel, community kitchen guest

"...coming here makes you sort of less, savage? Just coming and actually meeting people and just sort of chatting with them." – Paul, community kitchen guest

This provided a reason for coming back that was more than simply sustenance – 'enjoyment' (Holmes, 2019). The reasons why people accessed food aid sometimes resemble Holmes' constellation of thrift, for there was (always) financial necessity, sometimes enjoyment, and even 'conscience'. 'Conscience' was particularly at play in the community kitchen, where participants also spoke about the value of reducing food waste, and in the community food centre where people talked about food justice. Significantly, I found that these social, environmental, and even educational motivational factors (e.g., learning about food systems in the community food centre), all contributed towards reducing the stigma attached to accessing food aid – because these sites offered alternative reasons for why people would be accessing them and could promote themselves in different ways, unlike the food bank, which could not be separated from its identity as a food aid service.

In other ways, 'conscience' intersected with financial necessity when participants would 'swap' food at the food bank with their family's tastes in mind, another practice that resembled shopping and choosing between items that offer the most value:

> *"...because I'm not that fussy, it's more looking at stuff and
> thinking 'oh the kids will like that, the kids will like that'" – Tom,
> food bank client*

Care was often revealed in similar little things (Thrift, 2000) – such as asking for an extra portion in a takeaway pot at the community kitchen, in order to take it home "for the Mrs" who was unable to join. Or conversely, when people turned down food in the food bank or would not take food from the 'help yourself' table because they do not '*need* need it' when 'others' might need it more. A response impacted on by the recognition that resources are finite, indicating a sense of community solidarity.

11.2.2 SHOPPING AND 'RESOURCEFUL' FOOD PROVISIONING

Like Miller (1998), I found that 'shopping around' was a common thrift activity, particularly for those who were primarily eating at home. Driven by financial necessity and the need to "do more (consumption) with less (money)" (Evans, 2011, p. 551) – shopping around was often a time-consuming process that involved

budgeting and required participants to have a knowledge of where to go to 'save' on the cost of food, and in the case of reduced items, *when* to go to make savings.

> *"If you take £10 to Tesco express, up the road…you're gonna have a meal for a day. But if you take that £10 and spend it wisely, you can have a decent meal that can last you four or five days. The only thing is you gonna have to do buy things in bulk…It's not only that, but at certain times if you pop down to Tesco, like between 4 and 6 o'clock all the stuff that's going to go out of date, they put all of them on sale. So, if you be there on that time, you can have a massive saving doing that." – Matthew, food bank client*

> *"…if I go to Iceland's and I look around and their beans are 50p for a can, I'll walk up to Aldi's and go and get three for that, you know? So, I do budget, and I do work out where I'm gonna shop to how much, I don't buy expensive things…I spend more time shopping in different places, trying to budget, so they [her children] can have a decent meal." – Leanne, food bank client*

While both these quotes articulate the careful or cyclical nature of thrift, Leanne's quote also shows that financial necessity is not the only motivational force at play. Resonating with Holmes (2019) and Miller (1998), I found that thrifty shopping was often also motivated by care and responsibility, in Leanne's case - for the family, but in other circumstances, care for the self and for the environment. For example, one of my participants, would 'save' money by shopping in budget supermarkets, which enabled them to occasionally 'spend' money on more expensive ingredients from Tesco, allowing them to cook meals that were culturally familiar and comforting for them, using items that were not available from western-centric budget supermarkets or from sites of food aid. Another of my participants, Jack, did not agree with the way in which supermarkets dominate and impact upon the food system and consciously tried to avoid them, shopping as locally as possible with independent retailers. However, with limited resources, he often had to make a 'trade-off' between his 'conscience' and 'financial necessity' (Holmes, 2019), shopping locally only within reason.

Sometimes participants shopped around in order to assuage both their financial needs and their environmental motivations. For example, Dan, a member of the community food centre, talked to me about how he balances financial constraints with his family's desire to eat food that is ethically grown.

> *"...the tricks that I guess that we do, is try to maintain as much sort of organic food as possible. So, it's just the little things, such as, if you go to Lidl, everything is cheaper, but their organic carrots are quite ridiculously cheap compared to other shops. So, we'll just buy like a lot of them and eat a lot of carrots, so it means that like as a percentage of our veg, we're increasing the amount of organic food that we eat."*

While Dan told me about sourcing organic produce from 'expensive' shops like the Better Food Company – a local independent supermarket stocking "the best organic, local and ethical brands" (Better Food, 2020) – he explains that they find ways of eating 'good food' at budget prices. A trade-off made due to financial necessity.

Participants also sourced food in other, highly resourceful ways. For example, Dan sometimes volunteered his time labouring on a city farm (not Sims Hill) in exchange for produce – mostly whatever they had a glut of. In addition to which, he would also take advantage of the 'Incredible Edible'[50] sites in the city centre, picking food when he was passing. Interestingly, his knowledge of these more resourceful ways of sourcing food actually stopped him from accessing more conventional sites of food support, such as the food bank, because of an ethics of care for unknown others (Miller, 1998). As he explained:

> *"I feel that there are people who maybe might need it more, who then I might be like in place of? Someone who doesn't know about [the farm] or doesn't have that opportunity."* – Dan, CFC member

Others practiced resourceful food provisioning that drew on similar natural resources – which I position as a 'relational' resource. For example, three of the participants told me that they had either scrumped for apples, foraged for berries or gleaned at the side of crop fields as a way of getting by – one participant even told me that they used to grow veg on an allotment that had been abandoned with a few friends. However, as this quote illustrates with the use of the past tense (the interview took

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[50] Incredible Edible Bristol have various gardens across the city which grow food free for anyone to take and eat. Garden are maintained by volunteers on land which is largely disused urban space.

place in March), foraging is a seasonal practice, which meant that it was an undependable form of food provisioning.

> *"I used to just go out and go foraging, go and pick fruit and things, it used to be my thing, I liked doing that - then making homemade stuff." – Tyler, food bank client*

Importantly, like in Dan's case, each of these practices required knowledge and 'know-how' to be able to identify plants, locate them, as well as know how to harvest plants in safe ways.

> *"I went off like picking herbs, and wild mushrooms and stuff, and I thought 'let's try some of these', and I took some of the stuff called sweet beet, and another one called mangelwurzel and they're really nice, but they're not grown for us - they're grown for animals." – community kitchen guest*

In contrast to shopping, two of the participants in this study disclosed that they had stolen food from supermarkets as a way of getting by. One of these participants discussed the circumstance around his use of this thrift tactic, and I found it interesting to see how financial necessity and care were both motivating factors in the act. As a vegan for environmental reasons, he would steal "expensive vegan stuff, like tofu", that he was unable to afford to purchase, and could not get in a food aid site. Significantly, he made a point of only shoplifting from large, 'faceless' organisations (large supermarkets) who would not be personally impacted upon by loss of earnings. Illustrating a form of 'getting by' which also blurs into 'getting (back) at' poverty.

11.2.3 FRIENDS AND FAMILY

> *"...without those support mechanisms in place, I can't imagine what life is like for some people without their family or a good friend group around them, it's just not fun. It really isn't fair." – Jack, food bank client*

Resonating with Lister (2004), I found that material support from social support networks played a crucial role in participants' capacity to 'get by', and the extent to

which participants benefitted from this relational resource differed, for it was not always a reliable, or desirable, option for the participants. Exploring this further, I found that the type of support on offer, and whether there is scope for reciprocity, has a significant impact on the acceptability and acceptance of support.

The most common type of material support provided by friends and family was in the form of money and food. These took different forms, from meals, to food shopping, to lending money – interestingly, one participant even talked about their friend informally 'banking' their money for them, to support them with saving for a deposit on a private rental property.

Something I found significant was, with regards to food aid, the support was not always directly in the form of material resources but could involve sharing information about *how to find* these resources:

> *"...somebody had just left [the drop-in food site], and I wasn't thinking of going there, but they said, 'oh you've got to go down, they've got jerk chicken', and I said, 'oh no way!' and they said, 'quick, quick' and I ran down there and there was jerk chicken! It was amazing!"* – Ray, food bank client

> *"A friend of mine, he also goes there - he was the one who showed me the FoodCycle."* – Pedro, community kitchen guest

For some, the support provided was significant. As one participant told me, their family members would buy them a regular food shop from the supermarket, which the participant topped up with the weekly veg-share from the community food centre. Though this wasn't always well coordinated:

> *"My mum shops it for me. She pays for the food, and then when his Mum and Dad come down, they bring food down as well. His mum buys a lot of veg, but she tends to come when I've got loads of veg, so I end up with a fridge full of veg."* – Jamie, CFC member

For others, though the support was not continuous, it was dependable, and provided a safety net when they needed it. As was the case for Matthew:

"They are there for help if I need it, anytime. A few weeks ago, I was having such a bad – it's all this sanction thing. I came home, just checked my electric and realised there was only like £4 left in there, and I've got no money. So, I called my Dad, expecting him to just drop me like 10, 20 quid – that would have been alright. But he went way beyond that and… yeah it makes me feel alright, you know." – Matthew, food bank client

Sometimes accessing support from friends and family meant that participants had to make trade-offs between their environmental ethics, and their financial necessity:

"I try my hardest to be vegetarian, I do eat fish occasionally. Sometimes when you do get hungry, you can't really be fussy sometimes. Like if you go round your friend's house and they cook for you, you can't really be like 'no thanks'. But I'd prefer to be a vegetarian." – Jack, food bank client

But crucially, the frequency and level of support that was provided was also dependent on their circumstances, and for some, the support was irregular because family members or friends were also experiencing hardship:

"They support me as much as they can. You've also got to remember, a lot of my family are in the same position, so they're on benefits as well." – Leanne, food bank client

"I do have friends as well that I rely on…when they've got money, they help me out as much as they can with that. If they haven't, they kind of just give me little bits and bobs just to last me until I get paid? That sort of thing. It's quite good… [but this month] I don't know who else I'd turn to, cause even my family and friends haven't been able to help this month because they're skint themselves and all that. And thing with them is that they're making their food last and that for themselves! So, it's been - I've just been relying on the foodbank." – Tyler, food bank client

This is important because it shows us that food insecurity is a relational phenomenon, which is not just contained to the circumstances of an individual or household but is also contingent on the resource capacity of others to provide

support. This means that when support networks are strained, participants are more likely to seek out other sources of provision, such as food aid services, because their everyday coping mechanisms are unavailable.

However, it is important to note that in many cases, the notion of asking friends and family for support was undesirable, and echoing Patrick's (2017b, p. 72) findings in their study on welfare reform, material support though appreciated, was also a source of embarrassment and shame for participants who wanted to be – and be seen to be – self-sufficient.

> *"I don't really like doing it [asking friends and family for support], because I like to feel a bit self-sufficient." – Rosie, accessed all sites*
>
> *"You know, I stand on my own two feet and that's the way it is. That's the way I am." – Leanne, food bank client*
>
> *"I just feel like I need try and support myself really. I mean if I'm really, really really desperate then yeah, I'll go and see him. But I try to get by with what I can, you know?" – Michael, community kitchen guest*
>
> *"They support me, they do. But you know what, for some reason I've got too much ego, I've got too much pride. I tend not to do it too often." – Matthew, food bank client*

From these quotes we can see that pride, and the stigma attached to being seen to be unable to manage in food insecurity (or poverty - Lister, 2004), often prevented people from accessing the relational resources they needed from friends and family. However, because I encountered these individuals in sites of food aid, they were able or opting to access support through these other – more anonymised – means.

Sometimes, feelings of shame and failure were connected to the participants' expectations for where they *should* be at their stage in life:

> *"...my mother's close as well, so if I do get really hungry, I can always go and have dinner with her and stuff. But that's not cool – I'm 31, I don't want to be reliant on my friends and family." – Jack, food bank client*

"I think it's self-judgement, I guess. I'm 35…I feel like I should be doing more" – Tom, food bank client

And in turn, this also affected those who they would turn to for support. For example, though only a couple of participants I interviewed had older children who were in a position to support them, both participants refused to ask their children for support. One of the participants even disclosed that they had contemplated suicide rather than go to their daughters for help:

"I wouldn't dream of asking my daughters. Even - I know it sounds awful - even if I was desperate, I would not go to them…I was here one night and I was so depressed I actually considered standing on the ledge and then just leaning backwards. I actually considered suicide because I thought I can't go to my girls…" – Jackie, food bank client

However, this particular individual was able to ask their friend for support, who, as a peer, was perceived to be a more acceptable option for the participant than their child. But it was also more than this, because I found that the way in which the support was delivered offered scope for reciprocity.

"…sometimes she'll come up and she'll be here for a few hours, and I'll say to her 'what do you want for tea? I don't know', and she'll say 'I fancy Miss Millies' [chicken shop]…I say, 'oh I aint got a lot of money' and she'll say, 'well you go and get it, I'll pay for it'. So, I say 'yeah, fair enough'. So yeah…I'd go down the shops, she'd give me the money, I'd buy the food and come back, put it out and we'd eat it." – Jackie, food bank client

Reflecting on the stigma of asking for support, Kempson et al.'s (1994, p. 151) found in their study on the financial circumstances of low-income families, "help in kind was more acceptable than cash, and exchange was better than a loan, which, in turn, was better than a gift". Lister (2004, p. 137) points to this in her work on agency, stating that "…drawing on social resources is an *active* process of giving as well as receiving", exchanges of reciprocity which I found were most frequently practiced

within mutual aid networks (I describe this later in 'sharing food') and amongst street homeless communities, as Pedro explains:

> *"Yeah, we always like supporting each other, me and my friends or other people, we always support each other. Giving food sometimes. So, if one doesn't go, the other will grab it, and gives it to the others. There's always stuff like that happening between friends." – Pedro, community kitchen guest*

While participants sometimes received money from friends and family, many did not often lend money because of their financial circumstances. However, I found that in-kind reciprocity was part of 'getting by' and included the exchange of labour (as in Jackie's case) and of material resources.

Importantly, people did not, and do not share resources just because they have the means to do so – in the context of food insecurity a good example of this is when parents 'go without' in order to ensure that their children have enough to eat. Sharing food and resources is not just an everyday way of 'getting by' but is also a way in which care is performed. This ethics of care was reflected in the ways that participants described the support that they had received from friends and family, but it was also reflected in participant's decisions *not* to ask for support from these support networks. For example, in Matthew's case:

> *"...it makes them worried...I don't like to give them that feeling of pressure. My problems are my problems. But they are there for help if I need it, anytime." – Matthew, food bank client*

Though Matthew knows that his parents are there for support, and does sometimes ask for money, he did not disclose the extent to which he was struggling and using the food bank because he did not want his parents to worry about him. He regularly visited them for meals during the week, which helped him to 'get by' as well as receive emotional comfort through the "proper" African food that his mum would cook him. But the meals weren't framed as 'support' to his parents, because he was also there for social reasons, which disguised any 'need'. Importantly, deciding to

access the food bank was also a form of self-care because it enabled him to appear like he was providing for himself in the eyes of his family, which prevented him from revealing his embarrassment, thus saving his pride. I found this significant because it provides nuance to research that finds that people use food banks as a last resort – often after exhausting support from their friends and family (Garthwaite, 2016c) – instead, Matthew's experience illustrates a situation in which accessing food aid is more desirable than turning to family for support, even though these relational resources are available.

11.3 UTILISATION OF RESOURCES

This section explores everyday thrift practices employed beyond (and before) food provisioning. As I illustrate, the utilisation of resources and the process of food provisioning are interdependent, and while I demonstrate that much of thrift involves "exhausting the value of what one already has" (Holmes, 2019, p. 132), I also acknowledge that much of 'what one already has' is down to careful food provisioning.

11.3.1 WITHHOLDING AND RETROSPECTIVE THRIFT

A common finding in research on the experience of food insecurity is that people often 'skip meals' in order to make their resources go further and ensure that loved ones have enough to eat (Caplan, 2017; Dowler et al., 2011; Harvey, 2016; Patrick, 2017b; Purdam et al., 2016; Strong, 2020b). This is often a gendered practice (Caplan, 2017) which resonates with the literature on thrift – where mothers 'sacrifice' the quantity or quality of their diet in order to satisfy their family's tastes (Cappellini & Parsons, 2013). While I do not have sufficient data to draw a comparison between genders, I did find that those with dependents – children or grandchildren – would practice different forms of withholding in order to ensure that their loved ones would have a more nutritious or varied diet.

One of the participants spoke about how at her lowest point she was barely eating, skipping meals to ensure that her child had enough to eat:

> *"...everything that I had, I just gave to [my child]. So, I didn't eat,*
> *I didn't drink anything, I just drank the water, I ate stale bread and*

> *stuff. I gave him [pause] everything that I bought, I gave it to*
> *him." – Hana, food bank client*

Another participant spoke of how she would water down her milk to make it go further, saving the whole milk for her grandchild:

> *"I've got one lot of milk that I keep for her, and one lot I water*
> *down for me. Because I find, if I water it down it makes it stretch*
> *further, so it is a lot easier…at the end of the day, it's just gonna*
> *be skimmed milk." – Jackie, food bank client*

Referring to rationing, a food bank client would withhold food in preparation for when his children came to stay, rationing his food during the week:

> *"...just a bit of prep or rationing, I guess. Making sure I look at*
> *things where I think 'oh yeah the kids will like that', I'll just try and*
> *stick to plain or basic stuff for meals so that when they come*
> *round, I know there'll be a few things which I know that they'll*
> *enjoy." – Tom, food bank client*

In another circumstance, a participant reframed the need to skip meals in the form of a 'win-win' in which, instead of 'skipping' meals, he was 'fasting' to promote health, which he 'enjoyed'. A tactic which can be seen as an emotional coping strategy (Salonen, 2016) because it enabled him to reframe the skipping of a meal in terms of wellbeing and self-care.

Interestingly, I found that the 'artificial affluence' (Kochuyt, 2004) created through these practices – which was often redirected towards children and loved ones - was also practiced retrospectively in the pursuit of self-care. Borrowing from the future, participants would sometimes 'treat' (Miller, 1998) themselves and buy a takeaway or get themselves a 'pay day treat', such as an expensive coffee in a café. Though these practices were often said to be few and far between, participants commented that it would be when they were 'paid' or 'had money'. These types of practices often contributed towards a pattern of withholding later in the month, but offered a moment of enjoyment and reprieve from the day-to-day work of 'getting by'.

> *"I got paid on Monday through the benefits system...Since Friday*
> *I've been struggling, and this is rather nice to be able to eat today!*

[To] eat food I haven't brought myself today, haven't prepared." –
Ian, CFC member, sitting with me in a local café

This is significant because it highlights how acts of withholding, though utilised to enable an act of love or (self)care, are still uncomfortable practices of getting by, and sometimes even of survival or 'holding out' – in the latter case, particularly for those who were street homeless and reliant on food aid as part of everyday subsistence.

11.3.2 BATCH COOKING AND FREEZING

A common thrift activity employed by participants was 'batch cooking', which often required 'economical' shopping, such as buying items in bulk – 'spending to save' – which involved weighing up price vs value for money (Miller, 1998). However, participants would also batch cook using ingredients that they sourced through sites of food aid. The types of food created through batch or 'bulk' cooking were often meals that could be bulked out with cheap ingredients like beans or chopped tomatoes, even water, and participants commonly reported cooking soups, spaghetti bolognese and curries. Importantly, batch cooking was almost always followed by 'freezing' meals, which enabled participants to 'save' these resources for future consumption. Significantly, freezing food was important to participants for different reasons, each illustrating different forms of self-care.

For Matthew, who stays out late with friends and who, when working, would often have evening shifts, batch cooking was a way in which he could save time and energy over the week:

> *"...the last thing you wanna do is come in at 11 o'clock and start cooking. Yeah, you just wanna blast something in the microwave and forget about it, yeah. So, when I do it, I do it in bulk about once a week. Lot and lot of food in ice." – Matthew, food bank client*

Cooking economically and living alone can create a scenario in which one has to eat the same meals time and time again. However, by batch cooking and freezing meals, participants can vary what they eat to a certain extent. Accessing sites of free food can also be seen as a thrifty way in which participants enabled further choice in their diet.

"[I] put one soup into the fridge for today, but another into the freezer, because I had soup leftover from [free food place]. Umm, cause, I didn't want to eat it two days running. But that would have been three days running...if you're trying to cook as a single person on your own, it is cheaper to cook things in bulk, but then you have to eat them four, five, six days running, and that's not so much fun. And often, can actually go off before you get the chance to eat it. So, I do try and freeze stuff, but then I also try to improve the diversity with what I'm eating as well." – Ian, CFC member

Batch cooking and freezing food can also evoke a feeling of security and was used as a way of 'getting by' at certain times of the month by one of my participants, Ray.

"I just put them in the freezer, and then I just sort of pick at them. Especially in the days that I know, like, next week, from Wednesday, I'm gonna struggle to get some money. So, by the end of this week I'll have a few stews and things like that, put them in the freezer and so I know that they'll cover me for those days. So generally, that's how I do it. Just try to stock up." – Ray, food bank client

Describing himself as a 'functioning alcoholic', Ray employed tactics such as these in order to free up resources for alcohol. Echoing the practices of street youths in Ontario, Canada, explored by Dolson (2015), who found that they would 're-prioritise' their spending in ways that helped them to 'get by', which created an alternative logic of care – for example, spending money on weed, rather than food, in order to cope with their circumstances. In Ray's context, when these frozen meals run out, he is often faced with a situation in which he has to access sites of food aid:

"if I really really need to. So, if I've got absolutely nothing in the freezer, and I can't see any way of getting some, I'll just walk down to the [drop-in] and get a meal there. Or occasionally I've gone there with my Tupperware and just put it in there and taken it away with me and then eaten that over a few days." – Ray, food bank client

For Ray, freezing food is a way in which he cares for himself, by ensuring that he can avoid using food aid sites, which he finds uncomfortable, because to him, they

represent his inability to provide for himself since his divorce and loss of job a few years previously. Interestingly, by taking Tupperware with him, he still has to experience that discomfort, but does not have to linger in it.

Significantly, even when securely housed, the extent to which people had access to cooking facilities, and the fuel to cook with, had an impact on the practice of thrift. The trade-off between heating the home and cooking are well-documented experiences of food insecurity, particularly during the winter months (Beatty et al., 2011), and in their study on food bank client profiles, Loopstra & Lalor (2017, p. x) found that over 50% of their participants "indicated they were unable to afford to heat their home for over more than four days in a month". Conducting many of these interviews over the winter months I found a number of the participants experienced issues heating their homes – as articulated in 'The System is Broken', when Leanne and I sat in her living room, the one room in the house she heated during the day for her baby. Many reported situations in which they had to choose between 'heating or eating', for example, when talking about buying in bulk and batch cooking, Matthew tells me:

> *"at the moment, not…I'm not like cooking, because I don't want to cook too much. I'm quite down on electricity and I don't want to spend too much time cooking on the grill. I'm trying to make my electricity I got yesterday to last at least a week. You can be careless cooking constantly in the house."- Matthew, food bank client*

In addition, participants who lacked sufficient cooking facilities or equipment at home, or were vulnerably housed, living in vans, on the streets, in hostels, or in tents, with limited or no access to kitchen facilities, were far less likely to 'batch cook' and freeze food. In light of this, I found that those who were in such situations would access drop-in community meals so that they did not have to cook (as Matthew would do) but would also access food banks and other sites in order to save a significant amount of money on food which they would then be able to spend on their heating. In both circumstances, at-home facilities impacted on food aid use.

11.3.3 RISK-AVERSE COOKING

In their study on the practice of thrift at dinnertime, Cappellini & Parsons (2013, p. 125) found that "everyday meals are thrifty meals, as they are driven by the idea of saving resources, including time, money and effort". A finding which resonates with the practice of 'risk-averse' cooking. Like other practices of waste reduction, such as those we've encountered in previous sections – namely, freezing and consuming meals for a number of days – 'risk-averse cooking' is a way of preventing food waste by cooking meals which are influenced not only by financial necessity, but also "by the family's likes and dislikes" (Cappellini & Parsons, 2013, p. 125). It was a form of cooking particularly practiced by those with children who were 'fussy eaters' and was often accomplished by the use of meal plans, shopping lists and careful budgeting.

> *"I think, if you cook food that they don't enjoy eating, you waste it. So, my point is, why would you cook… I mean, I wouldn't cook for my son, a curry, because he wouldn't eat that curry. All I'm going to do is chuck that plate of curry in the bin… sometimes I can cook two different meals. So, one of them might have pastie and chips, one of them might have sausages and chips, you know. So, I like to know that I've got stuff that my kids will eat, rather than having to throw it in the bin, cause it's a waste doing it like that." – Leanne, food bank client*

Interestingly, this also resonates with Valentine's (1999) work on family consumption, where she found that the home is a site of multiple consumption practices. In this context – financial necessity – one could assume that restricted resources would mean restricted variety, but this is not always the case. Instead, in this scenario, Leanne sometimes cooks different meals for her children in order to ensure that they do not waste food, which is, by proxy, money.

> *"I hate waste. It's just chucking your money away when you're living on a budget." – Leanne, food bank client*

She positioned this practice in opposition to how she was brought up. Growing up in a low-income household, she recalls similar practices around food waste, however,

unlike her mother, she does not force her children to sit at the table until they have eaten all of their food, even if they do not like it. Reflecting on this practice as "*a waste of time*", she instead opts to spend her time in different ways – on 'shopping around' and food preparation in order to ensure that her children have food that they like to eat and that she can afford. Which she viewed as a more *productive* use of her time.

Reflecting on risky and 'risk-averse' cooking, the food bank manager who ran the 'Eat Well Spend Less' cooking course also noted that, for those who are living on limited resources, the idea of cooking something unfamiliar, which may not taste nice, or might go wrong, are key barriers to people trying new (and often healthy) foods at home. As she states, "it's going to be too much of a risk if your income isn't secure" because you might not have anything in the cupboards to fall back on. Which also raises the importance of considering skill, because batch-cooking and risk-averse cooking sometimes involved skilful use of resources, but not always skill in cooking.

Importantly, all of the participants in this study were experiencing food insecurity because of financial hardship, but for a small group, this financial hardship was compounded by the lack of knowledge and skill around cooking on a budget. For these participants, having the opportunity to learn informally in sites such as the community food centre, or formally in sites such as the Eat Well Spend Less course run by the food bank, was well received and were felt by participants to be effective at reducing spending and improving confidence.

11.3.4 SHARING FOOD

Sharing food was another form of thrift practiced by participants, which enabled access to future resources - as Lister (2004, p. 137) states, "…drawing on social resources is an *active* process of giving as well as receiving". For example, one of my participants would participate in shared meals in their house share, finding that cooking for four people was cheaper than cooking for one four nights of the week. Sharing resources in this way was particularly important for one of my participants,

Rosie, who lived in a close-knit community of van-dwellers who practiced mutual-aid as an everyday way of getting by.

Sharing food meant that Rosie gained access to resources she would not otherwise have been able to. Regularly sharing food with friends who live in similar circumstances to her – she tells me how they each contribute different ingredients to communal meals, and by doing so, ensure their resources go further, which also reduces the cost of a full meal for each of them. She used food aid to be able to contribute within these mutual aid networks. Notably, she would cook meals for friends who had shower and washing facilities using surplus food from free food places – an in-kind exchange – and had even shared meals using food from the food bank:

> *"I thought the food was really good actually. A nice variety of different things, like sort of, main meal stuff, fruit stuff, oats - I love making oats and muesli…I cooked a lot of communal feeds actually for... especially things like having - I think I was given like 2 kilos of rice, so I was like, 'ooh that's a lot of rice', so I ended up cooking some curries for people, and it was just really nice, especially when like, helping people cook food when you're like, 'oh I have these things'." – Rosie, accessed all food aid sites*

Importantly, because Rosie often frequented drop-in type free food places, she often had access to fresh surplus ingredients but not staple goods such as dried or tinned food. For this reason, the food she received at the food bank was particularly useful.

> *"…generally, it's fresh food that you can get a lot of the time freely, and work for, whereas working for grains doesn't happen so much. So, it was nice to get that balance of like, 'okay, now I've got some stock foods, so I can actually make some quite tasty creations with the fresh stuff I get." – Rosie, accessed all food aid sites*

I found this significant, because it highlights a different manifestation of food insecurity than what is generally experienced. For while in many circumstances, fresh produce is the desired form of food aid support, in Rosie's circumstance, the

food bank enabled her to be able to cook more substantial meals because of the access to cupboard goods.

Importantly, sharing food as a part of a reciprocal support network was not only practiced to secure future resources, because it was a practice which also enabled the performance of care. For Rosie, sharing food, the social value of commensality, and cooking with others is intrinsically good for health and wellbeing, and she often used food to show her care for others. It is notable that because she was able to source surplus food from free food places (a 'relational resource'), this is a resource she can access to show care and have the capacity to 'give' to others ('enjoyment'), which in turn increases her wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have sought to illustrate different and varied ways in which people 'get by' and make do when experiencing food insecurity, to show how agency is articulated even in constrained circumstances. 'Getting by' in this context, refers to practices that ensure participants and their families have enough to eat. Listening to participants describe the meals they made (or skipped), the places they shopped, the families they supported, the friends and family who supported *them*, and the food aid provision they accessed, it was clear that thrift enabled people to make their resources go further, care for themselves and care for others. Often in ways that ensured they and their families were able to eat food they liked and were comfortable eating – at least part of the time. Interestingly, I found that the care implicit in practices of 'getting by' also stretched to include care for the environment at times, which is often positioned as at odds with thrift (Evans, 2011; Miller, 1998). Exploring ways in which people source food (provisioning) and ways in which participants utilise these resources once possessed, I found that the availability and accessibility of relational resources, as well as participants' knowledge, 'know-how' and personal circumstances have a significant impact on the experience of food insecurity and the type of food aid model that is accessed. And aside from practicalities, the use of food aid and support from friends and family is an emotionally conflicted experience, where people can often feel cared for, as well as ashamed, all at the same time. With this in mind, I found that ways of supporting

friends and family that could be reframed as 'social', or 'reciprocal' were less stigmatising, just as services that offer food aid *by stealth*, by which I mean services that operated alternative identities – e.g., reducing food waste, learning about agriculture – were less stigmatising than those that offered only one reason for being there. This articulates how significant choice and dignity are to the experiences of community food projects, for where people must go to these sites out of financial necessity, they have the potential to create stigmatising experiences.

12. CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the everyday lived experience of food aid and food insecurity in East Bristol. It has examined three different models of food aid – the food bank, the community kitchen, and the community food centre – and has revealed how they work, what they provide, what happens in these spaces, who uses them, how they are experienced, why people use them, and how they are used. By investigating these sites, this thesis has explored the value and significance of food aid for those experiencing food insecurity, revealed why there are different forms of food aid provision and has, more generally, sought to understand where the food aid sector connects and separates. In order to explore a wider landscape of food aid, this thesis is built on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted over 11 months between September 2017 and August 2018. It is produced using data from ethnographic fieldnotes; 35 semi-structured interviews – 21 of which were with service users and 14 with food aid providers; a focus group with food bank volunteers; and, of course, visual photo documentation. The intention of this thesis has been to build an ethnographic account of food insecurity and food aid from the perspectives of those who access, and those who provide food aid in East Bristol. In order to do this, it centers the voices of those involved at the heart of this thesis and contributes a place-based study of recent food insecurity and food aid phenomenon.

Joining the ever-growing chorus of voices examining the lived experience of austerity, this thesis contextualises food insecurity as primarily a problem of financial hardship created, perpetuated, and intensified by austerity policies. As we have seen, food insecurity has increased exponentially under austerity, where policies have disproportionately impacted low-income households through cuts to public services and welfare reform. The increasing prevalence of low-paid and insecure employment, coupled by the rising cost of living has compounded the impact of austerity measures, creating the precarious conditions for food insecurity. Food bank data reflects this, and year on year, the number of food parcels distributed across the UK continues to grow.

In response to the retrenchment of the welfare state, community-based food aid initiatives have emerged, providing much needed support for those marginalised by government policy and structural inequalities. While these food aid responses have taken various forms, the most identifiable food aid provider is the food bank, which has been the focus of much academic and political attention under austerity. While such attention has been warranted, for they are a new phenomenon in the UK and a symbol of the failings in our welfare state (Riches & Silvasti, 2014; Cloke et al., 2017), less attention has been paid to other emergent forms of food aid provision, such as those that utilise food surplus to address food insecurity, and those that approach food aid through holistic growing spaces. Addressing this gap in knowledge, this thesis has sought to expand our understanding of food insecurity and food aid by exploring different forms of food aid provision within the bound geographical urban area of East Bristol; and has sought to understand the value of these sites for those experiencing food insecurity by exploring the significance of food aid in amongst other forms of support and everyday agency exercised in pursuit of 'getting by' (Lister, 2004).

Indeed, the key contributions of this thesis are found in its analysis of the wider landscape of food aid, including the food bank but also beyond the food bank, explored through a multi-sited place-based approach; in the examination of these sites through specific encounters, which illuminated power dynamics at play; and through its centering of the voices of those experiencing food insecurity, from which it is possible to explore everyday agency. Revisiting the empirical chapters in the following section, I highlight key findings that have emerged through this study of everyday life. I then follow by exploring key themes that have emerged across the sites of research, which can broadly be categorised in terms of 'power' and 'precarity'.

12.1 FINDINGS

In the first empirical chapter, 'The System is Broken', I explore journeys into food insecurity and food aid use. Focusing on three individuals – Leanne, Ian, and George – I explore the varied ways in which financial hardship intersects with housing, health, relationships, debt and caring responsibilities to create food insecurity. The

majority of participants in this study were in receipt of welfare benefits as their primary source of income, and in this chapter, I highlight different ways in which the welfare system can create or intensify precarity – creating a shared lived experience shaped by frustration, boredom, disillusionment, and importantly poor mental health, resonating with Standing's (2011) work on the precariat. The stories shared within this chapter help to contextualise emotional and psychological experiences of financial and food insecurity as well as explore restricted decision-making for people in such circumstances, illustrating how different circumstances can lead people to access different forms of food aid.

Turning to the sites of food aid, I explore the food bank and the locality in which it is based – Easton – in chapters five and six. Examining East Bristol Foodbank through the five stages of the Trussell Trust food bank model in chapter six, I show how the food bank is a site of multiplicity that has potential for care, discipline, and politicisation - findings that resonate with other literature exploring food banking in the UK (namely, Cloke et al., 2017). Interrogating moments of disruption (Dawney, 2013), I draw to expectations of behaviour within this site – in particular, expectations of gratitude – and point to the appropriateness of the food available. Highlighting the limited capacity for choice and agency in the food bank model, and the significance of encounters with material goods, and between volunteers and clients, for articulating status and value in this site. As a 'service' that has become part of the welfare landscape in the UK, food banks are the most widely accessed site of food aid examined in this thesis, and by paying attention to ways of working and the foods available, I question the appropriateness and inclusivity of offering predominantly Eurocentric food items in an area of high cultural and ethnic diversity.

Chapters seven and eight explore the FoodCycle Community Kitchen based in Barton Hill. Focusing primarily on moments of encounter – often in the form of disruption – between volunteers and guests, this chapter highlights a duality within the community kitchen, where two distinct communities are created and for the volunteers, regularly reformed. Exploring how the movement of food and the project's rules and regulations have the potential to create sameness and difference (Cloke et al., 2017) between guests and volunteers, this chapter highlights the tensions at play not only between guests and volunteers, but within the guest

community, and between volunteers and the central charity. Drawing attention to unequal power dynamics within such spaces.

Chapters nine and ten introduce the Community Food Centre and the environment in which it is situated. As a project that sought to approach food insecurity 'differently' to the other models of food aid I explore in this thesis, much of this chapter explores the benefits and challenges of taking an alternative approach. Explicitly critical of the food bank model and supermarket surplus food initiatives, the community food centre worked 'holistically' to address wider issues of vulnerability associated with food insecurity as well as to address hunger, and in doing so, it sought to subvert many of the power imbalances at play in the community kitchen and food bank, as well as empower and nurture the members of the group. In this chapter I examine the everyday of this site, revealing its transformational capacity, but also its lack of sustainability, for it was a time consuming and costly operation that reached very few people experiencing food insecurity. Working holistically to address food insecurity, the participants most often experienced physical and mental health issues, and while this site could provide an approach to food insecurity that valued wellbeing, there were still limitations to their participative approach and food aid model.

In the final empirical chapter, I examined the ways in which people 'get by' (Lister, 2004) when experiencing food insecurity, looking specifically at 'food provisioning' and the 'utilisation of resources'. Exploring everyday agency in constrained circumstances, this chapter takes forward discussion from chapter 4 and observations from each food aid site, to highlight the ways in which personal circumstances impact on the type of food aid model accessed, emphasising the hard work, resourcefulness, and care performed by those experiencing food insecurity. In doing so, it works alongside the first empirical chapter to challenge behavioural explanations of poverty and food insecurity, as well as highlight why different models of food support are necessary in the absence of structural policies to address food insecurity.

12.1.1 A NOTE ON PLACE

Taking a place-based approach to the study of food aid, it is important to acknowledge the impact and importance of place in the everyday lives of people experiencing food insecurity. In the context of this study, the availability of and access to affordable and appropriate shops, public transport, housing, support services and employment, among a range of other opportunities, has the capacity to significantly influence the severity of hardship or precarity that a person or household experiences, including the degree to which they are able to practice thrift. But while people's lives are shaped by place, their experiences of food insecurity also impact on the presence of food aid – for these sites are not available everywhere in the city and are usually found in areas of deprivation. By taking a place-based approach to this research, I gained insight into why and when people would use different forms of support, but I was also able to see patterns within the food aid sites themselves. Interestingly, because the majority of food aid in this study is provided by people who have capacity to give their energy and time for free, there is a higher proliferation of food support in areas of the city that are easily accessible, or nearby to where wealthier residents live – such as in East-Central Bristol, where there is a quickly gentrifying Easton resident cohort, rather than in more deprived areas in the outskirts of the city that are more difficult to access. This dynamic can have the added complication of leading to the 'parachuting in' of food aid provision to areas where communities are not consulted, nor involved in the type of food response developed. An important consideration, which leads us to questions of power.

12.1.2 POWER

Though I recognise the food aid models in this research to be sites of multiplicity with the potential for care, discipline, sociality and control, and to be neither entirely 'good' nor entirely 'bad' (Cloke et al 2017). I must also highlight how power, or rather the imbalance of power, was evident in each of the three food aid sites to varying degrees, manifesting in different ways. It was evident in the makeup of the volunteers and service users, as those providing the food aid were predominantly white and middle class, from a position of privilege – either older retired volunteers, as was the case in the food bank, or younger students and professionals, such as in the community kitchen and even in the community food centre. While in

comparison, the service users were usually on a very low income, unemployed or in precarious employment, vulnerably housed, and in the food bank in particular, were from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

As I explored in the literature review and empirical chapters, having 'choice' can be a marker of full citizenship in consumerist societies such as ours (Bauman, 1998; Caplan, 2017; Salonen, 2016). When such choice is restricted, such as because of food insecurity, those accessing food through sites of food aid could be said to be 'secondary consumers', which can have a negative emotional impact on food aid recipients. In the community kitchen and food banks the power imbalance between service users and volunteers was particularly visible in the control of food and in particular, by the lack of choice and agency on the part of the service user. For example, in the community kitchen, guests were unable to make meal requests and were given food that was chosen by the volunteers. In many cases, it was food that, while healthy because of the fresh fruit and vegetables, they would not have chosen because they were not following a vegan diet. In the food bank this dynamic was even more pronounced where volunteers would choose the food that a service user was to eat in their food parcel, or by volunteers 'protecting' the food displayed in the help yourself boxes, or by carefully monitoring food swaps. This lack of choice and restriction not only related to their physical agency and capacity to choose, but to the materiality of the items on offer in the first place. In an area of high ethnic and cultural diversity, the food bank provided predominantly Eurocentric food in the standard food parcels, and culturally diverse foods – aside from chickpeas and other pulses – were relegated to the 'help yourself boxes', for they were not seen to be part of the core, nutritionally balanced food parcel. Interestingly, in the community kitchen, despite collecting a wide variety of culturally diverse food, this rarely got incorporated into the meal itself because volunteers would not know how to cook it and was again relegated to the help yourself table. By comparison, the relative neutrality of the vegetables distributed by the community food centre enabled people to have the capacity to cook a variety of different cuisines, and the Community Worker would try to plan meals that were culturally diverse to give members the opportunity to try new dishes, while at the same time be open to suggestions from the group as to what they would like to make. Though it should be recognised that more could have been done to grow culturally diverse foods on the site itself.

The power imbalance was also evident in the expectations of behaviour placed on service users – whether explicitly through the use of a 'project agreement' in the community kitchen, or implicitly, in the expectations of gratitude in the food bank. In particular, where expectations of behaviour were disrupted, such as in the refusal or criticism of food, or if someone was seen to be swapping too much food in the food bank, societal notions of the 'deserving and undeserving poor' emerged, and service users were deemed ungrateful or 'not in real need' by volunteers.

Importantly, the power imbalance and associated feelings of shame or embarrassment was to a great extent subverted by reciprocity and the capacity to contribute towards the meal or project in some way – a practice that was consciously woven into the everyday of the community food centre. And indeed, within friendship groups, to be able to reciprocate support – even in-kind – was seen as a more dignified and desirable relationship dynamic.

12.1.3 PERSISTENCE OF PRECARITY

Precarity is another broad theme that emerges from this study and applies to both the individuals and the sites of food aid themselves. For those accessing food aid, precarity connects their experiences. It is revealed in the insecurity and vulnerability to hardship which leads them to food aid; in the continual hard work, stress, frustration and trauma of having to constantly 'get by' and make do – to be resourceful; and in the persistence of precarity for many who access food aid. As we have seen, food aid is not a solution, it does not address the root causes of food insecurity, which is primarily created by a lack of money driven and compounded by structural inequalities.

In the context of the food aid sites themselves, precarity is visible in the persistent need for, and intensification of food aid; in the increasing acceptance of food aid models that utilise food surplus to feed food insecurity – the alleged 'win-win' that perpetuates inequality between those who can afford food and those who are secondary consumers, given leftovers from our broken food system (Caraher & Furey, 2017; Caplan, 2017; Salonen, 2016); and importantly, it is evident in the

vulnerability of the food aid sector itself, where there is an over-reliance on under-funded and voluntary community-based projects to address a national problem of food insecurity, which has led to the proliferation of socially, ethically and environmentally unsustainable models of support.

12.2 WHY THIS MATTERS

Writing this during the Covid-19 pandemic, I need to emphasise that while this thesis focuses on the everyday of food aid and people's experiences of food insecurity between 2017 and 2018, such experiences have significantly increased and intensified over the past year, as have community-based food aid responses. Affecting people's capacity to 'get by', Covid-19 has impacted people's livelihoods, their physical access to food, and their support networks; and has had a devastating impact on people's mental health and wellbeing as well as, of course, people's physical health. But these experiences have not been felt equally across society, as "people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, unemployed adults, households with children and people with health conditions and disability were most at risk" of food insecurity during the pandemic (Barker & Russell, 2020). Findings that were reflected in a recent report from the Food Foundation (Goudie & McIntyre, 2021), who emphasise that while many of those at risk of food insecurity during the pandemic were also vulnerable *before* the pandemic, inequalities have widened, and there are groups who have become newly vulnerable "because of the adverse social and financial circumstances created by the pandemic" (p.16)[51], reinforcing our understanding of food insecurity as a structurally driven phenomenon, namely affecting income and access.

Calling this a 'crisis within a crisis', the Food Foundation (Goudie & McIntyre, 2021) conducted 7 nationally representative surveys between March 2020 and January 2021 and found that over a fifth (22%) of people now have less income than they did prior to the pandemic (p.8). In addition, those who were already financially vulnerable and in receipt of Universal Credit (UC) prior to the pandemic, experienced three times greater levels of food insecurity than average, despite the

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[51] Newly vulnerable groups face the challenge of having to navigate unfamiliar welfare and support structures during a pandemic, because of this, they have been referred to as the 'inexperienced poor' (Smith, 2021), and have highlighted issues around access and communication of support available.

£20 uplift to UC (p.11). This is particularly important because according to the national food insecurity data published earlier this year from the Department for Work and Pensions 'Family Resources Survey', 43% of households in receipt of Universal Credit experienced high or very high levels of household food insecurity[52] between 2019 and 2020 (Cooper, 2021) – data which was collected prior to the pandemic and the £20 uplift to UC. What this means is that with the conclusion of the furlough scheme and £20 uplift to Universal Credit at the end of September 2021, there is a very real concern that we are now only at the beginning of a long-term and far-reaching crisis of food insecurity and poverty more broadly, which will continue to compound existing social, economic and health inequalities in the UK. In Bristol, despite unprecedented levels of collaboration and coordination between the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, mutual aid groups, schools and the Local Authority to provide emergency food over the past year, we know that crisis responses are not sustainable. As we can see this from the prevalence of volunteer burnout, the increasing number of organisations supporting people using food surplus from our broken food system, and the very reality that many of these organisations actually reflect the food insecurity experienced by those they are supporting (Lucas et al., 2020). Now more than ever, we need a strategic and supportive response from government, which listens to, acknowledges, and acts in response to the experiences shared by those with lived experience of food insecurity.

12.2.1 LEARNINGS

But while there are national policy recommendations that can be drawn from this ethnographic work, particularly around the impact of certain austerity policies, this has not been the focus of this research. Instead, this place-based study of food insecurity and food aid use offers possible learning for a local, or hyper-local level of the food aid provider itself. Firstly, this study has highlighted the importance of involving your local community in decision-making – either through consultation prior to the development of the project, or through their involvement in the delivery of the project itself. Where projects do not have this level of involvement – such as

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[52] Survey respondents were only asked to report on their experiences in the 30 days prior to the survey.

in the community kitchen – the project risks reinforcing power inequalities. Secondly, and building on this first point, finding ways to enable reciprocity and involvement of those being provided food aid can subvert the feeling of charity, and can address some of the stigma attached to accessing food for free in projects that provide longer term support. By enabling an exchange of some form, the food is no longer 'free', but is in a sense earned. Thirdly, understanding your local demographic matters, consulting with your community and involving them in the design of food aid projects can prevent the formation of food aid sites that do not provide appropriate support, as was the case in the food bank where the diversity within East Bristol was not reflected in the food being provided. Fourthly, it is essential to understand the financial sustainability of food aid models – being clear about what is possible, diversifying food sources and funding streams to ensure that members or clients are not affected by the sudden closure of services that are sustaining their food provisioning in times of hardship.

Taking this research forward it would be interesting to explore these sites of food aid over a longer period of time – to see how practices and processes can shift, be reinforced or transformed with changes in staffing and volunteers, and in response to societal considerations, such as the impact of COVID-19, changed within the welfare system, the rising cost of living, and pressures on supply chains, such as those posed by Brexit. Such a study would also benefit from examining a wider range of food aid providers within the locality, following participants travel between these sites to understand the wider day to day implications of such societal shifts.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: INFORMATION SHEET[53]

Research project
'The Taste of Austerity: Investigating individuality and food tactics in a multicultural city'

Researcher: Lucy Jackman, PhD candidate at Swansea University

Supervisor: Dr Angharad Closs-Stephens, Senior Lecturer at Swansea University,

Information sheet

This research project will explore the relationship we have with food when we live on a low income. Food is often seen as the most elastic part of a household budget, the first to take a hit when money is tight. However, food also holds an incredibly important role in our day-to-day lives and our relationships with others. We are particularly interested in people who take an active role in the provisioning of food and the cooking of meals. The aim of this research is to find out what tactics people use to ensure they and their families have enough to eat, and to eat foods that they like when they live on a low income.

In this study we will discuss a wide variety of topics such as shopping, family and community support networks, recipes, food practices and cooking.

- The research will involve observation, audio-recorded interviews and cooking.
- Your participation in this project is completely voluntary and you can opt out at any time. If you do so, all record of the information you have provided will be destroyed and it will not be referred to in the research.
- If there are any questions during the interview that you do not wish to answer, or topics you do not wish to discuss, you are free to opt out of these.
- Any information you disclose will be used in academic research, teaching and publications. You have the right to request that particular or sensitive information is not included in this research.
- Anything you say will be treated in complete confidence and your information will be anonymous. Any identifying details will be removed and, once the study has been completed, the audio recording will be destroyed. The anonymised version of the interview will be kept in secure storage for a maximum of 10 years under the terms of the Data Protection Act (1998).

What happens if something goes wrong?
In the event that you have any concerns or complaints about the way the research has been conducted please contact the Chair of the College of Science Ethics Research Committee, cosethics@swansea.ac.uk

If you would like more information about this project, please contact Lucy Jackman

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[53] It should be noted that during the year in the field the title and focus of this thesis shifted slightly. As you can see from the title of the information sheet and consent form.

Prifysgol Abertawe
Swansea University

Coleg Gwyddoniaeth
College of Science

Research project
'The Taste of Austerity: Investigating individuality and food tactics in a multicultural city'

Researcher: Lucy Jackman, PhD candidate at Swansea University, ████████████

Supervisor: Dr Angharad Closs-Stephens, Senior Lecturer at Swansea University, ████████████████████

Consent Form

Please read the following information and write your initials in the corresponding box if you agree.

Have you read the information sheet and understood what this project is about?	☐
I am happy to be audio-recorded.	☐
I am happy for the information I share to be used in research, publications and teaching.	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can opt out at any time.	☐
I understand that any information I share will be confidential and anonymous.	☐

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant (Printed)   Signature   Date

_____   _____   _____
Name of Researcher (Printed)   Signature   Date

E·S·R·C
ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL

Foodbank questions

1. What's the most important meal of the day for you?

2. What food do you like to eat?

3. Are you able to eat these foods at the moment? Do your circumstances make a difference to what food you eat? In what way?

4. What are the reasons for why you've been accessing the foodbank?

5. What do you think about the food from the foodbank?

6. Are there other services you go to, to get food? (Why not/why those?)

7. Do you have friends or family who are able to support you at the moment? How?

8. How do you make sure that you have enough to eat?

9. Do you cook for yourself? How did you learn?

10. What words would you use to describe the foodbank?

11. How does it feel coming to the foodbank and being in that space?

12. Do you ever talk with other people who come to the foodbank?

13. Are you able to make decisions about what you eat at the moment?

14. How does it feel when you don't choose the food for yourself at the foodbank?

15. What would you like to have in your food parcel if you could choose?

16. What role does the foodbank hold for you at the moment?

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[54] These questions were replicated for the Community Food Centre and Community Kitchen interviews with the omission of questions 14 & 15. Questions were also added to suit the interviewee.

Questions for Real Economy Director

1. When did the Community Food Centre Project begin? What inspired it?

2. What do you think are the biggest issue people are facing when they get involved with the food centres?

3. In your opinion, how is the food centre at Sims Hill addressing these issues at the moment?

4. In what ways are the proposed centres across the city, starting with Southmead, going to reflect this model? Or will they be different?

5. What is the ethos of the Community Food Centre?

6. How important is the food itself within this work?

7. Who has responsibility for people experiencing hardship?

8. How inclusive and accessible are the centres for people from diverse cultural backgrounds?

9. What partnerships with other organisations have you developed? In what form do these partnerships or networks take? Future work?

10. Working in the food aid sector, how do you position the community food centres in the discourse on food banks? What do you think about other models?

11. What do you think about the food distributed by the food bank model?

12. Would there be a time that you would work in partnership with food banks?

13. You have a faith background, what do you think about the position of religion in a lot of these food aid initiatives?

14. How do you feel about your work so far?

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[55] As I mention in the methods chapter, interview schedules followed core questions (Q's 2,3,5,6,7,8,14), and adapted other questions to suit the interviewee and project.

<u>Eight questions to discuss:</u>

1. How long have you been volunteering with the foodbank for, and why did you get involved?

2. What do you think are the main issues that people are experiencing when they come to the foodbank?

3. In your opinion, how effective is the foodbank at addressing these issues?

4. What do you think of the food that is given out at the foodbank?

5. What role do you think faith has in the foodbank?

6. What moments stand out in your mind from your experiences at the foodbank?

7. How would you describe being in the foodbank?

8. How do you feel after you leave the foodbank?

The Drop-in Centre

Also run by Crisis Centre Ministries, the Drop-in Centre provides free meals, essential toiletries, clothes, a laundry service and shower facilities for those who are experiencing poverty. Predominantly frequented by those who are rough sleeping or vulnerably housed, the Drop-in Centre also hosts advisory sessions from statutory agencies and voluntary organisations. The Drop-in Centre was a popular 'free food place' accessed by some of the participants I recruited through the community kitchen and the food bank.

The Community Café

Attached to St Mark's Church, the Community Café operates as a not-for-profit, selling food at low affordable prices to encourage inclusivity. They are able to keep their costs low with the support of volunteers helping to run the café, and source much of their food from FareShare. In addition to their affordable prices, the café provides free meals to those who cannot afford to pay and employ the use of a 'pay it forward' scheme to cover some of these costs. A number of participants who accessed the food bank also reported getting free meals from the community café.

The Church

Located in Lawrence Hill near Barton Hill Settlement, the Church was often mentioned as another 'free food place' by participants from the community kitchen. A drop-in service with support and advice services incorporated, the Church provides meals and snacks at various points during the week along with access to essentials such as laundry, showers and use of computers. In addition, they provide one to one support and host agencies delivering advocacy and advice services in the space. Primarily catering for people who were homeless or vulnerably housed.

The Free Food Market

Repurposing surplus fruit and vegetables straight from wholesalers, the Free Food Market operated every two weeks enabling people who are struggling, to access

fresh produce for free. Though run by a local charity supporting refugees and asylum seekers, it was open to anyone experiencing food insecurity. The market operated on the edge of Easton and started during my fieldwork year. Though only one of my participants reported accessing this service, it was an interesting model of surplus food aid.

The Food Plus

The Food Plus is a charity that supports people who are experiencing financial hardship and food insecurity by both alleviating the immediate need of food and providing a 'wrap-around' range of support services to address the underlying causes. Much like a food bank, the Food Plus provides food to prevent hunger and operates a referral system through agencies and organisations that work with vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in Bristol. But unlike the food bank model, the Food Plus continues to support its clients for longer periods of time, operating a holistic service that incorporates mentoring, advice, signposting, crisis grants, and training. Further to this, clients are given the opportunity to choose their weekly food provisions in accordance with the 'eat well plate'. Based in a nearby area to where I conducted this research, three participants reported having used their services either presently or in the past.

The Supper Club

Established by a group of volunteers who had previously been involved with FoodCycle, the Supper Club was a community meal that took place every Wednesday in a small community building on St Mark's Road. The aim of the meal was to reduce social isolation and create an opportunity for developing connections within the community. Using surplus food, they produced a three-course meal, which included a vegan or meat option for each course. Diners would then eat together around one large table and there are usually between 15 and 25 people attending. If people want to help prepare the meal, they are encouraged to arrive at 5pm, the meal being served at 7pm. Though the majority of the food used is free, the cost of the space is not and as such they ask diners for donations towards the meal, though if you are not in a position to contribute this did not prevent you from eating. This is an interesting example of a project that does not promote themselves as a food aid initiative, but because of the related issues of poverty and social isolation, did cater

for two of my research participants in exchange for their support in-kind preparing the meal.

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