Life & Times

Foodbanks:

their use and how to access one

I was recently at a conference of GPs and a paper was presented related to food poverty. In the discussion that followed, I realised that I, and many others in the room with me, lacked a full understanding of how a foodbank is run or accessed. Here I share my experiences of visiting a local foodbank in East Yorkshire with a foundation doctor colleague.

WHAT HAPPENS AT A FOODBANK?

Foodbanks are run by the voluntary sector, the largest being the Trussell Trust with a network of over 420 foodbanks.[1] They gave away over 1.3 million emergency food supplies last year, nearly half a million to people with children.[1]

When we arrived at the foodbank, we were struck by the unassuming location. It was basically a small office and storeroom situated halfway down a residential road. We were met by a group of enthusiastic volunteers including the Chair of Trustees of our local Trussell Trust foodbank.

They explained how clients access the foodbank via a voucher system whereby each voucher is used in exchange for a 3-day supply of emergency food. The foodbank can supply vouchers to appropriate local agencies, such as welfare advisers, children's centres, and general practices. There is no absolute limit to the number of vouchers issued, but the voucher system is in place to ensure the foodbank is only used as a 'bridge' at times of crisis while the client, along with help from other agencies, develops longer-term solutions. Foodbank volunteers offer a free hot drink and a friendly chat, and can signpost clients to relevant support as well as supplying the emergency food. If a client attends for the first time without a voucher they won't be turned away but repeat boxes will not be offered without agency engagement.

ADEQUATE CALORIFIC INTAKE

Each voucher is currently valued at between £25 and £100, and has a unique reference number and is printed on coloured paper to reduce inappropriate use. This allows foodbanks to keep a record of recurrent users and track them to the referring agency if needed. In addition, it allows for data analysis to see how foodbanks are being used.

Food boxes are organised into a variety of sizes for different sized families, with a content list agreed in consultation with dieticians to ensure adequate calorific intake. Contents are all 'long life' and include cereal, milk, fruit juice, soup, pasta, meat, fish, vegetables, and puddings. Volunteers prepare boxes in advance, which clients can take away in supermarket carrier bags, giving a degree of anonymity. Our local foodbank issues approximately 50–60 per week.

Photo taken by the author at the Trussell Trust East Yorkshire Foodbank with their permission.

DEMAND SET TO RISE

Food boxes are not allowed to contain food exceeding the best-before date, but there may be additional products, sometimes fresh foods, exceeding the best-before dates that clients can take at their own risk. Dates are clearly labelled on products to aid stock rotation, avoid wastage, and prevent re-sell. Other products such as nappies and sanitary products may be additionally available.

Local relationships between churches, shops, and other businesses help to ensure a regular supply of non-perishable, in-date food, but there are inevitable peaks of supply around harvest festivals and Christmas, and peaks in demand such as during school holidays.

Although the Trussell Trust is national, each foodbank works locally, so food donated within a local population feeds that population. Money is not used to purchase food but regular income is needed to cover building costs, insurance, and other running costs, and foodbanks rely on regular donations and local fundraising events to cover this.

The most common reasons for using a foodbank are low income (28%), benefit delays (24%), and benefit changes (18%).[1] Our local Trussell Trust branch is bracing itself for an estimated 40–50% increase in demand as universal credit is rolled out locally, based on the experiences of other areas. GPs are increasingly likely to encounter patients who have used or need to use a foodbank.

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1. The Trussell Trust. End of year stats. 2018. https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/ (accessed 2 Oct 2018).