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A report on the introduction of a Financial Inclusion Service at Norwich Foodbank

The 'Making a Difference' Project

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Executive Summary

Background

Food insecurity is when a family or individual struggles to have enough to eat and is associated with uncertainty, worry, anxiety and hunger. Foodbanks provide emergency food provision. This need can be triggered by a change in circumstance or a crisis, or not having long-term sufficient income. Failures in the social security safety net are the most significant driver for hunger in the UK. There is some evidence that an advisory service which runs alongside a foodbank is more effective in reducing emergency provision and the duration and severity of hunger.

The 'Making a Difference' project at Norwich Foodbank is a pilot scheme aiming to increase financial resilience in their service users. From summer 2022 Norwich Foodbank introduced new advice worker roles, in partnership with Shelter and the British Red Cross, to work alongside an existing Citizen's Advice worker. All three roles are funded through specialist grant funding streams. The aim of these roles is to pre-empt the need for foodbank use, to triage the financial needs of service users and refer appropriately to reduce repeat visits to the foodbank.

The brief

This independent research by University of East Anglia (UEA) aimed to evaluate how effectively these roles are working and to:

- 1) Understand how well the roles are operating on a practical level (identifying barriers, facilitators and any potential friction points in referrals and partnership working)
- 2) Whether the service is operating as intended
- 3) What learning points are there so that the service can be adapted appropriately

What we did

From July to October 2022, we interviewed the Foodbank Manager to have a greater understanding of the aims of the 'Making a difference project' and four staff and four volunteers.

Main findings

Our independent research points to a service that is supporting people with highly complex needs that is provided in a compassionate and person-centered way and cuts across multiple agencies. It aims to holistically provide a service that ‘wraps around’ the person.

The volunteers and staff are highly experienced and use their connections to work collaboratively and seamlessly with the individual. This not only efficient but it also reduces the need for distressing stories to be repeated thus helping to reduce shame and stigma and build trust.

Sitting in the heart of a community, especially when in community cafés, helps to promote the service and break down barriers. The consequence of this is that the service is reaching ‘seldom heard’ clients who would traditionally not have accessed support, despite their often dire needs. This puts Norwich Foodbank in a unique position as they adapt their service going forward.

There was mutual respect and understanding between the volunteers and the advice workers with volunteers integral in building trusting relationships and reducing stigma. They are all proud of the work they do. However, our findings suggest that they are providing a ‘frontline’ service, often listening to distressing life stories. We suggest that there is consideration given to the vicarious trauma that could result from this.

Recommendations

We suggest that the findings from this baseline evaluation are used by Norwich Foodbank to help them develop their financial inclusion provision for people who are traditionally excluded but who are accessing them through their emergency Foodbank service in the heart of communities. Staff and volunteers would provide excellent insights into planning a service for the future, beyond providing emergency food aid.

To consider the role of providing social prescribing, as Norwich Foodbank is uniquely placed to access people at high risk, with highly complex needs in our seldom heard communities.

Working with people with complex needs is emotionally demanding and staff and volunteers may benefit from additional opportunities to share experiences and for support.

Background information about food poverty and financial inclusion

Food poverty (also sometimes called food insecurity) is when a family or individual struggles to have enough to eat. In high income countries (such as the USA) one definition is, “the uncertainty and insufficiency of food availability and access that are limited by resource constraints, and the worry or anxiety and hunger that may result from it” (Loopstra, Reeves, & Tarasuk, 2019). Food insecurity might be triggered by a change in circumstance, a crisis or can be the result of a long-term poor access to affordable food.

A recent analysis of food insecurity in the UK found that vulnerability to food insecurity had worsened among low-income adults between 2004 and 2016, particularly among those with disabilities and that sanctioning of benefits was linked with the rise in foodbanks (Loopstra, Fledderjohann, Reeves, & Stuckler, 2018). In the ‘State of Hunger’ Sosenko et al. (2019) provided clear evidence that the growth in levels of need for emergency food is strongly linked to limitations and changes in the social security system available to working-age people, and the way in which these interact with changes in people’s circumstances and their access to wider support. The follow up report by the Trussell Trust (2021) came to the same key conclusion that not having sufficient income from the social security safety net is the most significant factor as a driver for hunger in the UK. The report states that this is more often due to how the social security system is designed (who is eligible for what support and how much benefit income is received by people eligible) than due to operational errors with benefit administration. The other key finding was that two ‘background’ factors were associated with food bank use (a) ill-health or adverse life experiences (such as household separation or eviction), and (b) lack of informal and/or formal support. Adverse life experiences and ill-health both worsen people’s financial situation, through creating extra expenses or through undermining their capacity to navigate the benefit system. In some cases, benefit problems clearly also exacerbated health conditions (Trussell Trust, 2021). These reports and studies were of course before the current crisis caused by the substantial increase in fuel costs.

In financial year 2019/2020 Norwich Foodbank supported 12,577 people (it was 8,905 in 2015). Of the 300 referral agencies, Norfolk Citizen's Advice were the largest agency (817 referrals), followed by Broadland District Council (247). Others include Age UK Norwich (113) and Earlham Early Years Centre (74). Nationally, low income and problems with benefits are two of the main reasons people end up needing emergency food. This is no different at Norwich Foodbank with the top reason for referrals being: Low income (3,746), Benefit changes (2,324), Benefit delays (2,276), Debt (2,094), Homeless (511).

To support the wider determinants of food poverty as discussed above, many Foodbanks and Social Supermarkets also provide support in benefits advice, debt management, housing insecurity etc. Such financial inclusion work has a particular focus on maximising income from welfare benefits and enabling access to debt advice. For example, it is known that the Healthy Start vouchers have a poor uptake. In 2021, on average only 54% of eligible families were receiving Healthy Start vouchers (which help parents of young children and pregnant women buy fruit, vegetables, milk and infant formula) and so missing out on this particular benefit (Sustain, 2021). Pension credit is a 'top-up' benefit of up to £3,300 per year available to people on low income at state retirement age. The UK government state that around £1.7 billion is unclaimed (DWP, 2022). Independent Age (a charity supporting older people in the UK) in their Pension Credit Briefing, state that uptake has stagnated at around 60% over the last 10 years, that around £2.8 billion has gone unclaimed every year since 2009/10 and that low uptake of pension credit costs the government £4 billion in increased NHS and social care spending (Independent Age, 2020).

Norwich Foodbank's own data shows that approx. 65% only attend once. Yet it is clear in evidence given to the All Parliamentary Group on Hunger that, "the more support made available to people during their first visit to a food bank, the shorter the period of time they are likely to be hungry" (Feeding Britain, 2015). The 'Pathways from Poverty' strategy from Feeding Britain suggests that the use of advice workers reduces the duration and severity of hunger and means they no longer need to rely on emergency food parcels. Their work has shown that signposting is not enough, and often resulted in return visits to the foodbank. Instead Feeding Britain suggests that an advisory service which runs alongside a foodbank is more effective in reducing emergency provision. The 'Making a Difference' project at Norwich Foodbank is a pilot scheme aiming to test this.

Norwich Foodbank already work in partnership with the Norfolk Citizen's Advice (their main referral partner since 2020), and specialist advisers from Shelter [one Shelter volunteer since 2019 and one paid Shelter staff since 2022], supported by trained volunteers embedded within their service. The aim of this independent research by the University of East Anglia (UEA), is to understand how this is going to work in practice, whether it is meeting its aims as intended, any learnings from setting up and operationalising of the scheme, and any unintended consequences.

Purpose of the 'Making a difference project'

Providing emergency food parcels is only one facet of the work of the Trussell Trust and Norwich Foodbank. With an ultimate aim of ending the need for foodbanks in the UK, they also aim to increase financial inclusion in their service to prevent food (and fuel) crisis and increase financial resilience in their service users.

From summer 2022 Norwich Foodbank had two new roles, in partnership with Shelter and the British Red Cross, to work alongside an existing Citizen's Advice worker. All three roles are funded from grant funding streams by the foodbank. The aim of these roles is to pre-empt the need for Foodbank use, to triage the financial needs of service users and refer appropriately to reduce repeat visits to the foodbank.

This aim of the independent research conducted by the UEA was to evaluate how effectively these roles are working, specifically to:

- 1) Understand how well the roles are operating on a practical level (identifying barriers, facilitators and any potential friction points in referrals and partnership working)
- 2) Whether the service is operating as intended
- 3) How the roles are perceived by staff and volunteers involved with implementing the project
- 4) Provide case studies to illustrate the needs of clients and to describe particular issues in the current climate

Methods

The research used qualitative methods, using semi-structured interviews with a topic guide (See Appendix I and II). The manager of Norwich Foodbank was interviewed at the beginning of the scheme (to understand the issues being addressed, the role of partner organisations, resources allocated, contextual factors and how the Financial Inclusion scheme is being operationalised) and again at the end of the study period (to understand any changes in implementation, any lessons learnt over the initial implementation). In addition, we interviewed four paid staff members who gave specialist advice and four volunteers who in their role could potentially signpost clients to the specialist advice, in addition to managing the food parcels. We used a case study approach to encourage participants to share their experiences and anecdotes in an in-depth way (Kitzinger, 1995; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 1994). Case study methods, as described by Yin (1994) is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context.

Interviews were completed in a way that best suited the person. This included face-to-face in coffee shops, online (Zoom or Microsoft Teams), from July to October 2022. The interviews were all digitally voice recorded, transcribed and password protected on OneDrive at the UEA. Staff and volunteers, who were potentially identifiable due to being a small team, were given a copy of the findings to give them the opportunity to revise their responses. All identifying information was removed.

Data storage

All information provided during the study (including names and contact details) was stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the UEA Research Degrees' Code of Practice 2012. The project was approved by the Faculty of Medicine and Health Ethics Committee (ETH2122-2144) on the 13th July 2022.

The interviews

Setting up the study with Norwich Foodbank Manager

The Norwich Foodbank Manager shared their hopes and aspirations for the Making a Difference Project. This was to support people to reduce the need for food in a crisis situation.

"At the moment it's just person needs food, give them food... it's quite prescriptive and there's not much wiggle room. Whereas with this, it can be what can we help you with and whatever you say there will be someone who can do that for you."

The aim was to have a person-centred provision and for referrals between agencies to avoid individuals having to repeat their stories.

"So sometimes we do get clients who sadly we will go from service to service to service because they're not getting the answer they need. Having the specialism in housing and debt, in mental health and with Citizens Advice, it will each equally remove some of the issues that they hadn't got time or specialism to do."

There was also a vision for volunteers, that by supporting the Financial Inclusion Service there would be consistency for each person who enters the Foodbank. In the future, trained volunteers could be embedded to provide additional support to the advice workers, for things like:

"a phone call if someone is lonely, reading a letter with someone who doesn't speak English or has dyslexia, or showing someone how to get the bus".

So, once again supporting people beyond the crisis of their immediate needs.

As this is a new service that has not been piloted before, there were some concerns such as that the service may be under or over utilised, that the current cost-of-living crisis might mean that there is not enough advice or support available to meet need over the longer term. If this was considered a successful pilot, there were also concerns about financing and sustainability of the scheme in the longer term.

What our interviews told us

From the analysis of the data provided in our eight interviews with staff and volunteers we developed four key themes: 1) Providing complex holistic needs assessment: A service that 'wraps around the person', 2) Being in the heart of the community, 3) Reaching seldom heard communities 4) Empowerment 5) The needs of staff and volunteers

Providing holistic complex needs assessment: A service that 'wraps around the person'

From a staff and volunteer perspective it was clear that they wanted to provide person-centred care. For one person, this was about having the skills to recognise when someone was in need and reaching out with kindness.

"There is such a need to recognise and remember people's names. Being remembered, having someone who cares enough to call them by their name, that just opens the door for us to be able to help in other ways... it is part of the holistic approach to poverty, if we go out of our way to make sure people are supported, most likely when things are better they will just come down and have a coffee with us." (Staff 4)

For another, this was about recognising that needs were not only complex but also often traumatic too.

"You try and sort it out in there and then because then that's the best thing for the clients. They don't have to tell this story about five times to different organisations, it can re-traumatise them to think about things they don't wanna think about." (Staff 2)

It was clear that the people that presented to them had very complex needs that cut across many different services.

"You have to work with the whole person and all that they're coming with. My focus might be housing, if there's anything attached to it then, for example, I said, oh, I could look for organisations that might be able to support you with information around becoming self-employed and, I would make them aware of those situations." (Staff 5)

"I'm really passionate about helping people on that day, but that wrap around support... the fact that we can say go and speak to them there and then you know that's somewhat removes all of that extra life things that might just get in the way to stop that person actually ever getting that chat so they're just invaluable in what they can provide. Because I'm not there in a professional capacity, I'm just a volunteer. I can only bring kind of what I know personally and through other roles, but being able to give people that holistic advice is great." (Volunteer 4)

"They've all got a common reason for coming, there is a lack of money somewhere. And I think that's what we've got to try and focus on. Where is it, what are the bits that you are failing on in the system or it's failing you in the system." (Staff 3)

"That's the stuff that really is important in people's lives is how to navigate the benefit system, the housing systems, you know, to ensure that they do have a reasonable standard of living. So I think we can. And I think we'll keep trying. And I would say I don't guarantee, I can't promise you anything, except I'll try. I'll try really hard." (Staff 5)

"We're looking more and more at what rather limited access to funds there are, to try and just get people over or through periods of crisis really. We're dealing with many, not all, but many people that are really on the edges if you like of financial exclusion, I would say they don't live the kind of lives that many people would want to live. You know they really are people who are hand to mouth for various reasons and trying to find something where you can just get them through is quite difficult at times." (Staff 3)

Although 'Social Prescribing' was only explicitly named by one person, it featured throughout all our interviews and that this is not about merely 'signposting'.

"Social prescribing, we didn't know what it was, we just wanted to help people, we did it before it had a name. So what we find is, we call it hand holding 'cause, it's almost like you need to hold their hand and say it's OK, come with me, I'll lead you to this free group, I will lead you to this contact ... to find the right people and they have to be able to trust me." (Staff 4)

"Having a dedicated worker, Citizens Advice or Shelter is really useful because they will be able to follow these clients and check up on whether they are actually receiving the help that they need." (Volunteer 2)

There was a recognition that the complexity of people's needs required specialist knowledge, for example in risk assessment and safeguarding. An example was given of a man, whose mother had dementia and he had moved back in to support her, who had got into debt because he was borrowing money from his friends to make sure his Mum got food;

"We supported him to get the correct benefits, to get out of debt... we knew his problems would not just be sorted with three food parcels" (Staff 4)

"It's really important to have those, visual signs and to acknowledge, you know, to see if there's any risk attached in any way as well. So it's really useful and [being in the Foodbank], it's hugely important I think." (Staff 5)

"I know that I am limited by my knowledge, my expertise, I need other people to help with expert advice like debt advice." (Staff 4)

"I think that we're seeing lots and lots of people with poor mental health issues, people that basically social services are failing." (Staff 3)

Being in the heart of the community

Staff and volunteers all talked about their experience and local knowledge and being part of the community helped to streamline and facilitate access to other organisations. For example, being set in a community café was a common theme in opening up access and breaking down barriers.

"Working at the foodbank is really good because you can get a sense of common themes of what's happening ... and trying to build those community partnerships. If the Trussell Trust want to make things easier for people that are using foodbanks, they need to get local services involved that have local knowledge and can just have conversations." (Staff 2)

"It just feels more welcoming and it's just part of the community [Foodbank in community café] rather than somewhere that's kind of more intimidating or embarrassing to go to." (Staff 2)

"It really is kind of a community hub. Sometimes people will come in just because they know the Shelter advisor is there and not actually, you know, trying to access the Foodbank." (Volunteer 4)

"[Personally] often if I find out there's disability in the family, I can work out for different carers, organizations and local disability things that I know about." (Volunteer 4)

Reaching seldom heard communities

Because the 'Making a Difference project' is situated in the heart of a community, our interview data suggests that the service is reaching seldom heard communities and people who 'fall through the gaps'. It appears to be effectively compensating for clients that are often socially excluded from opportunities and services that could support them and who may previously have found services such as Citizen's Advice inaccessible. One ongoing challenge is how to best support and refer people with mental health and addiction problems.

"They're not, like the normal Citizens Advice type of client. I wouldn't have got them if I've just been at Citizen's Advice. They are like an undercurrent that no one wants to truly talk about ... but I am talking about the ones that we should be there to help, and this is where I think we're going to be facing a big question with other charities, frankly." (Staff 3)

"I think a lot of people can't just get their head around seeing Citizens Advice or you have got three screaming kids and you just sit and wait and wait to try to get to see somebody so I think the Foodbank has enabled more people to get the help that they do need because it is there rather than having to go to the Citizen's Advice and sitting in a queue They are both helping each other so I think it is really excellent." (Volunteer 3)

"With the cost of living crisis and everything going up basically everyone is more or less in a deficit budget, so it feels like even if you are doing a debt solution like a debt relief order, which is actually quite an extreme solution, they are probably going to be in the same situation six months, 12 months down the line. So it just feels like for our service [in the Foodbank] is a good way to access really vulnerable people that might not come otherwise." (Staff 2)

"If community is hurting with debt, struggling with mental health issues, I need to know, who can I contact, who can help me support these people so that they know that someone cares... What does this mean if I have no hope or they think is this it? What's the point? For me that is heartbreaking." (Staff 4)

Empowerment

Our interviews indicated the importance of empowering staff, volunteers and users of the service. It was apparent from our interviews that relationship building was key to establishing trust and being able to support those most at need and that there was a tactful and sensitive approach to asking clients for information.

"A lot of the way I work when I'm at the Foodbank is really informal and it's just chats (not a clipboard, form filling approach, because people say they just came here to get some food at the community café) and people come back week on week and maybe the first time we just say hi. The second time, they might say, "actually I've put this application for PIP [Personal Independence Payment] in, do you know how long it is for me to wait for that?" And you're like, Oh yeah. And then they come back the next time they've received my application and you know, and it just kind of builds on from there." (Staff 2)

"As long as people let me do it and they only give me constructive criticism to do it better, then I can keep doing it. If the bureaucracy becomes too much, then I probably couldn't do it ... I've got a certain amount of license at the moment, which is really, really refreshing. You have a freedom to talk to people and to find out what you can, so there's a kind of interaction. Well, I wouldn't say it's always enjoyable with some of them, but you know you have at least got that, and I suppose it's that that makes us become volunteers and do the work we do." (Staff 3)

"The volunteers are very knowledgeable about different services that are around as well ... they're it for me, if you gain their trust, that's the most important thing ... because they're the link. Building the relationships with the volunteers is absolutely key because they're the ones with the experience and knowledge around their client base and, the same people come back every week to these hubs and they know them. They know them so well, it's really impressive." (Staff 5)

"I think it's good that you've now got people like me, attached to organisations who can take responsibility that if something was to happen that is not on a volunteer's shoulders, that it's on ours whether we should pick this stuff up." (Staff 5)

Part of empowering clients was also treating them with dignity in what could be very distressing circumstances.

"He had folded up his red Foodbank voucher so small that no-one could see it, it's the very embarrassment, the tragedy and the shock of all of that." (Staff 4)

"It's just that extra thing where it's not just about getting free food and feeling like you're holding your cap out type thing." (Staff 2)

**"And for me, that's really important that you don't just do something for somebody that they're part of the journey and they become informed and empowered as a result of it as well... I'm here. This is my role. You're in control. You tell me what you want and need. I'm basically working for you."
(Staff 5)**

The needs of staff and volunteers

Staff and volunteers found the work very rewarding. There is however, a need for support, in what is a frontline and very challenging landscape. One staff member said:

"It's really quite interesting now we're doing a lot more policy stuff and trying to kind of work with other organisations. So it's sort of community based work. So it's really good"

and also commented:

"It's quite disheartening sometimes. We've been talking about you know how this can actually impact your own health as well, you know like kind vicarious trauma and things like that because it can be really draining to do that, but then there's just the amazing feeling that you've helped as well." (Staff 2)

"You know I think it's an honour to do this, I'm not just saying it, I am so proud that someone asked me to do this, and I've got great colleagues. And you see the best in human kind with a lot of these people. So that's what probably keeps you going." (Staff 3)

"I think because we have got Citizen's Advice people coming in for that, even if they are not using Foodbank, you might see them come back a few more times so you get to see a bit more success whereas before, when we didn't have CA, people would just come in and go and you didn't hear anything about them or if things had improved for them. So it is nice that that is there because you do occasionally see people getting things sorted out in their lives." (Volunteer 3)

"I suppose there's a degree of satisfaction of helping people but that is tinged with lots of sadness as to why they're there and how they're there. On the phones again, we quite often got people who had been referred because of domestic abuse and again several times we'd get a call to say cancel, that she's gone back to her husband and you think, Oh dear, that situation must be dreadful and you do worry about some clients."
(Volunteer 2)

"Having that extra person there that makes all the difference you know takes the pressure of us and we know, they're coming here and they're getting advice, which is the double bonus really. Not just food, but also other advice." (Volunteer 1)

Definitions of success

One of our interview questions was to ask staff and volunteers how they would define 'Success' (beyond not needing for Foodbanks to exist) at Norwich Foodbank. These are some responses.

- "Getting people what they are entitled to, making sure that the money they're getting is right, making sure they understand their legal rights - definitely. Helping people so that creditors and things back off. Income maximization, just kind of giving people that extra top up, that just means that they can live rather than exist."
- "Giving people as much financial independence and social independence, as much empowerment to live their own lives as how they would like to or can do in the interim."
- "I would just love every household to have enough income that they don't go hungry, that they don't struggle to pay their bills, that everybody has a very basic standard of living, which isn't just putting food on the table but actually give them a little bit of enjoyment in life. So people do have that little bit of extra. To be able to enjoy life and not just keep surviving... People are in the middle of this trying to make ends meet and the days of robbing Peter to pay Paul are gone because Paul has nothing, and Peters ran out too."
- "The longevity of just knowing that people know that we are here."
- "Not seeing repeat clients because that would imply that they have got enough support to enable them to support their families."

Case studies demonstrated from the interviews

Case Study I

A woman with two very young children with a chronic, life-limiting health condition and mobility issues who is registered disabled. Her particular circumstance was a rehousing into temporary accommodation due to domestic abuse. This relocation took her away from any social support and the emergency hotel accommodation meant that she had no access to cooking facilities. In addition to her emergency situation, the unsuitable accommodation (for her circumstances and her disability) meant that she had unnecessary costs due to having to eat out three times a day (A minimum of 42 meals). She attended Norwich Foodbank to get an emergency food parcel and was seen by a specialist adviser on the same day. She had less than £50 to last the week.

The outcomes of this were emergency food and kettle kits to use in the hotel to help with her food crisis. A referral was made through Norfolk Assistance Scheme due to the additional costs she had from fleeing from domestic violence (for example buying a double buggy so that she could walk to appointments). Additionally, she was given specialist housing advice which resulted in a move to accommodation the following day that suited her disability and mobility needs and enabled her to be able to cook for her children. Emergency food was arranged for the new accommodation. Staff, using their local contacts also took her to a place in Norwich where she was able to choose new clothes and started the process of a new bank account to enable her to receive statutory benefits.

"If I hadn't been at the food bank, she could have just been wandering around, the streets or whatever. She didn't know where to go. She was just waiting on a phone call. That's all she was waiting on from the council when she first came into the foodbank. She's like, they still haven't rung me, they still haven't rung me. I was like, don't worry, they'll ring you again. And the volunteers were like, let's get a cup of tea. Chocolate for the kids and crisps and we will all sort this."
(Specialist adviser)

Case Study II

A single male who shares custody of his two teenage children after having recently had a relationship breakdown. He had worked as a builder but had also recently lost his job during the same time as he was having to move out of the family home and look for rented accommodation. He viewed himself as a typical masculine bloke, who had worked hard his entire life and managed to generally get by. He had never accessed Foodbanks or services like that before.

When he first approached the Foodbank, he could not bring himself to come inside and sat in his van, in tears and just absolutely devastated he was even there. On this visit, the volunteers served him from his van, offering him a cup of tea and some breakfast. The volunteer could clearly see his distress and wanted to see if someone could get to the bottom of what was really going on for him, rather than just sending him off with a food parcel and seeing him again next week.

On this occasion, the advice worker based at the Foodbank sat with the man in his van talked to him about his situation and found different ways they could help. He was in debt of £50 on his energy meter, and could not afford to run a hot bath for his teenage children when they came to stay. He was able to receive an energy meter top-up and have the debt paid off, and the advice worker helped to figure out what benefits he would be entitled to. He was also able to get food supplied for his beloved dog from the Foodbank.

For a few more weeks he continued to come and collect food parcels. This man still visits the Foodbank, but not as a client or to use the services. He comes regularly to have breakfast in the community space and chat with the volunteers, sometimes he brings his dog and the kitchen spoil the dog with bits of sausage and bacon.

Case Study III

A son and a mother. The mother has a diagnosis of dementia and the son moved back in with her to support her and to become her carer. Because of this change in circumstance there were complications in his benefits and he had got into debt through borrowing from friends. He was also aware he needed Power of Attorney but didn't know how to begin to do that. "We knew his problems would not just be sorted with three food parcels." Over a number of weeks he was supported to get the correct benefits, to get out of debt and with how to get Power of Attorney. He has come back since, visiting with a friend and said, 'my mum and I want to give back because of what you have done for us' and he had a big bag of food for the Foodbank.

Case Study IV

A woman and her family had been placed in temporary accommodation with the local authority, outside of their area. As part of this process, the family had given up all of their furniture because they were not aware that as part of a homelessness application, you can ask the local authority to store furniture at cost. So, the family had lost their home, and all their furniture and were having to start all over again. Having met them at Foodbank, the advice worker was able to talk to them about accessing support for future moves, such as for removal costs and supporting them to find an update on their accommodation situation with the council. Sometime later, the mother came to the Foodbank to tell the advice worker that they had been offered a house, that they were moving and that they wanted to come in and update the advice worker to let them know, and to say goodbye and thank you.

Particular issues in the current climate

These are particular issues illustrated through real cases that were shared with us by staff and volunteers.

The discretionary housing payment fund

"For example, if you're a Council tenant and you have a spare bedroom and you're a single person, this bedroom tax thing applies. And usually people apply for discretionary housing payments. But the fund that the central government had given this year is so much smaller that there's gonna be a lot more people that are being turned down for that where previously they were given it for, say, three months, six months. And every time they could reapply as long as their circumstances hadn't changed, it would be fine but now, because the fund is so much smaller, they've had to change the criteria for things. And so now they're just gonna say well, you have to pay that £11.00 a week because we need to target this money to families and more potentially more vulnerable people."

Unsuitable housing

"To try and get people that are in inappropriate accommodation moved to more suitable ones, but often they've got rent arrears or any debt, so many people that maybe their mobility is not so good and they need to move to maybe ground floor accommodation, but because they owe £700 of rent arrears is they're not allowed to bid and move."

Housing rights and advice

"We've got a lot of people that have come in that they need to move their kids to schools. They've got nowhere for them to move. They've got this no fault eviction hanging over them. They can't find the payment for another deposit for their next place. So [advice worker] can kind of help out with knowing all their legal rights when it comes to that and possible places to get funding or loaning deposits and no deposit schemes and things like that, cause you need you need one deposit before your previous one comes back from the landlord."

Emergency assistance

"Today I saw a gentleman that I spoke to two weeks ago. And he applied to the Norfolk Assistance Scheme. Last time I saw him, he was quite with it and he had a computer at home so I wrote down on a compliment slip the site he needed to find on Google. And he applied for help with gas, electric and food. And I helped in how he would explain his financial hardship due to the cost of living crisis. And he said today that basically he got £20 gas, £20 electric, and a food voucher and a mattress and a fridge. It was just awesome."

Utility bills

"I spoke to an older gentleman, and he was concerned about his gas and electric direct debits going up from £47 to £119. And he was like, oh, it's all on estimates. And I had a look on his smartphone, as he couldn't really see it as had quite bad eyesight. And I looked at it, and he was actually on a smart meter, so I could tell him that it was not right, you are getting bills. He had a motorized scooter, so that was probably taking a big chunk of the electricity so I could say to him if you are struggling, then we could do a Norfolk Assistance Scheme application."

Utility bills and people with disabilities

"I know people that are not charging wheelchairs that are not putting CPAP machines on at night because they can't afford the electricity for them. Electricity at the moment isn't a disability allowed expense. There's no extra help for this. And this extra money is supposed to cover things like that. But it's really hard to get. And PIP, obviously, not only do you have the physical form, but then you have to go for the in-person appointment as well and which can be a real barrier for people."

Specialist advice

"If there was some kind of like employment or immigration issue, I would refer to Norwich Community Law Service or would refer to Pathways if they had not been verified as rough sleepers."

Hard to support clients, such as people with addiction problems

"You could probably say that you've got those people that just hit a temporary blip because they've lost their job or one of the partners that take maternity leave or sick leave. You know, they probably will overcome their issue in the long run. And you've got the people in the middle. The pandemic really was the thing that set it off, where people that had been coasting along quite well or going along quite well and then the sudden thing with losing their work or taking a limited income and they probably were already just about, you know, managing to pay their bills and the direct debits but as soon as something rocked that boat they've been struggling ever since and they might come and go as and when they get bits of work and so on, and then you get what's called the hard core people that come to see us and they're the ones that bother me the most in a way because I think society really doesn't want to deal with them very much and they've got their own way of surviving and they will come to us when they need to come to us but if those people haven't got somewhere where you can refer them to, if there's not enough access to other means of help, like going through the rehab programs and things like that. It's raising a lot of moral dilemmas as well as the practical financial ones."

Seldom heard communities (falling through the gap)

"I'm always worried about the families that don't have a voice whose first language isn't English or from communities that are a lot more isolated. And I'm always concerned about how we reach those people. I feel like it's my goal trying to make it as accessible as possible in any way.... But you know, communities that we don't often see, that might be more isolated, that don't feel like they can reach out to authority for good reason and haven't had good experiences with social service systems, people whose English isn't their first language, that is hard."

People not living centrally

"I do think for those that I don't live centrally that there needs to be more services out there in the Community that they live and know that they can access rather than them having to come in and we're not talking that far. We're not talking Norfolk. No, we're talking literally with within the city parameters. So that's become really obvious to me."

Summary findings

Our independent research with staff and volunteers at Norwich Foodbank points to a service that is supporting people with highly complex needs that cuts across multiple agencies (housing, debt, legal advice etc.). Our interviews suggest that this service is provided in a way that is both compassionate and person-centered. It aims to 'wrap around the person', holistically meeting their needs, formulating plans together and empowering people to take control of their own lives.

The 'Making a difference' project involves embedding very experienced and highly connected advice workers from different organisations into Norwich foodbank centres. This enables them to work collaboratively and seamlessly with the individual. This has many benefits in terms of managing clients quickly and efficiently. Most importantly it reduces the need for the users of the service to repeat their, often distressing, stories which have the potential to be re-traumatising to them. It also helps to reduce shame and stigma and build trust.

Trust is also being built as the service sits as a visible presence in the heart of a community. The café as part of a community hub is a really important part of this as it brings people in for multiple reasons and again, helps to promote the service and break down barriers around shame and stigma. Our findings suggest that the 'Making a Difference' service is bringing in 'seldom heard' clients who are unlikely to directly contact the agencies involved. These tend to be our most socially excluded people. They are the people in our society who have the greatest and most complex needs that might be otherwise overlooked. This puts Norwich Foodbank in a unique position as they adapt their service going forward and to meet the demands of the current state of multiple crises.

There was mutual respect and understanding between the volunteers and the advice workers. The volunteers were integral in building trusting relationships, often based on lived experience. This slow build up of trust enabled the volunteers to link clients with the advice workers. All staff are proud of the work they do and it viewed by them as highly rewarding. However, our findings suggest that they are providing a 'frontline' service. They are repeatedly listening to the life stories and distressing circumstances of the users of the service in a very challenging landscape. We suggest that there is consideration given to the vicarious trauma that could result from this.

Recommendations

- 1) We suggest that the findings from this baseline evaluation are used by Norwich Foodbank to help them develop their financial inclusion provision for people who are traditionally excluded but who are accessing them through their emergency Foodbank service in the heart of communities. Staff and volunteers would provide excellent insights into planning a service for the future, beyond providing emergency food aid.
- 2) To consider the role of providing social prescribing, as Norwich Foodbank is uniquely placed to access people at high risk, with highly complex needs in our seldom heard communities.
- 3) Working with people with complex needs is emotionally demanding and staff and volunteers may benefit from additional opportunities to share experiences and for support.

Ideas for a workshop

Based on our recommendations, especially recommendation 1, to design a workshop for staff and volunteers to include the following:

Planning for the future (beyond emergency food) especially in the current economic climate

How might staff and volunteers like to be supported?

A vision around empowering staff and users of the service. A 'service that wraps around the person'. How can this be done better?

Social prescribing. What might this look like in Norwich Foodbank? How might this be the next step in providing ongoing support beyond the immediate crisis point. How can Norwich Foodbank utilise the fact that they are reaching seldom heard communities that other providers may be failing to reach?

Practical considerations for the design of services. For example, greater awareness of the availability of advice workers and where they will be based (on what day etc.). Sharing this resource across communities in Norwich and not just being centrally based (being in physically in the heart of the community is key).

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Appendix: Topic Guide for Interviews

Could you give me an over-view of the service from your perspective?

Could you talk me through some cases that you have been involved with?
[Prompt for what worked well and what could have worked better – unpick cases around debt, benefit delays, housing insecurity, benefits stopping as they moved into employment etc.]

Thinking of these cases – and others you have been involved with – could you talk me through the sort of advice you give and the sort of advice you need to refer people to. [Prompt for how the referral process works – what could be improved. How much are they using the Norfolk Community advice network <https://ncan.co.uk/> i.e. not just signposting. Unpick their specific roles – Shelter, NCA, British Red Cross]

In your opinion, how can Norwich Foodbank ensure that people are followed through / followed up / that people don't 'slip through the net'
What does success look like to you? [Beyond that Foodbanks don't need to exist]

Please can you give us your suggestions for how we could improve the service going forward [Financial advice/inclusion service and the Foodbank].

What else would you like to talk through with us to make sure we give really thorough feedback to Norwich Foodbank?