

How can we shift focus from repeat food bank use to a more-than-food approach?

Presenting an 'opportunity pathways' framework

OVERVIEW

- The UK has high rates of both food insecurity and persistent and deepening poverty.
- In 2024, 14.1 million people lived in food-insecure households and over half of those households had very low levels of food security; in the same period, 6.8 million people, representing nearly 50 per cent of all those in poverty, experienced deep poverty – the highest number since records began.
- These statistics demand a range of complex policy and practice considerations, including how food aid should be managed, how we identify people who repeatedly rely on food banks, and what systemic changes are required to reverse these unacceptably high levels of deprivation.
- These questions were high on the agenda for the research we completed with six food bank providers in Nottingham, where we were commissioned to explore reasons for repeat food bank use and identify gaps in non-food support (such as debt and welfare rights advice).
- The research revealed complex drivers of food bank use, which were similar for repeat and one-off food bank guests. We concluded that repeat food bank use is not a useful metric for planning a response to food insecurity.
- Instead, we propose an approach that moves beyond crisis support, shifting attention to structural solutions and the need to embed 'more-than-food' interventions.
- To facilitate this approach, we propose an 'opportunity pathway' which, through food relief, engages people in a range of additional support services intended to improve wellbeing, social capital and access to employment and other meaningful activities.

CONTEXT

This research is important given the high levels of food insecurity in the UK and because the emergency food provision delivered by food banks does not resolve underlying and deepening poverty.

Our research revealed that food banks in Nottingham have a variety of delivery models, and interpret and respond to repeat food bank use in different ways. We urge a turn away from short-term crisis support and a shift in attention to structural solutions, such as restoring adequate safety nets and focusing on developing skills and resilience.



'An analysis of repeat food bank use and development of an "opportunity pathways" framework' by Richard Machin, Eva Zemandl and Charles Walker in the *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* published by Bristol University Press Digital, March 2026.

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FINDINGS

- To promote a more-than-food approach, we propose an ‘opportunity pathways’ framework. Engagement through food is a core element of this approach, which builds trust and encourages engagement with support services.
- The framework is conceptually inspired by Blake’s food ladders (2023), focused on building resilience in response to food insecurity, and the ‘Pathways Out of Food Insecurity’ rubric (Pettman et al., 2023), a best-practice model for delivering food support with activities that promote more secure lives.
- We use the term ‘opportunity’ to avoid politically insensitive terminology such as ‘poverty’ or ‘insecurity’ and to represent a sense of dignity, agency and choice.
- The framework has four complementary and successive stages: (1) food relief; (2) social capital; (3) wellbeing; and (4) opportunities and security:

Opportunity pathways →			
Food relief	Foster social capital	Develop wellbeing	Opportunities and security
Food bank Food pantry Social eating Community café Community shop	Café Social interactions and activities (e.g. craft and sewing club, etc.) Volunteering Courses Cooking Holiday clubs Growing		Financial resilience (including welfare rights/debt advice, numeracy and digital literacy) Health care Housing Employment support Skills and training Language, reading and writing Healthy eating and exercise

- The ‘opportunity pathways’ framework promotes a journey from food relief to meaningful social interactions and activities, and a longer-term resilience encouraged by social welfare support and skills development.
- The effectiveness of the framework relies on data-informed responses and a combination of the food relief and more-than-food support of the voluntary and community sectors, with statutory services delivered by the local authority and NHS.
- This approach will more effectively address the underlying causes of hunger and foster social capital, benefitting not just repeat food bank users but all recipients of food aid.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Our recommendations take a systems approach to addressing food insecurity. Food banks and food relief projects such as food pantries should be utilised as hubs for integrated social, health and employment support:

1. **Implement an ‘opportunity pathways’ framework in targeted local areas:** the framework should be informed by local data and the experience of residents, community food organisations and strategic partners in the local authority, NHS and private sectors.
2. **Establishment of integrated support hubs:** to offer co-located food relief, more-than-food services and ‘opportunity pathways’ for people facing food insecurity, precarity and poverty.
3. **Commitment to a Food Charter in all areas of the UK:** to provide a framework to guide local policy with a focus not only on food security but also on supporting people to lead healthy and inclusive lives based on a sustainable approach to food production, distribution and consumption.
4. **Data and partnerships:** to ensure local partnerships work in a coordinated way, using research and data to position food insecurity and its underlying causes as policy priorities.
5. **Focus on the local level:** food insecurity research should concentrate on drivers at the local level to understand the extent, nature and location of need, for example with a spotlight on Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs).
6. **Policy engagement and advocacy:** to establish policy working groups that inform local policy development and advocate for national policy change to address the underlying causes of food insecurity.
7. **Prioritise long-term investment for community-based ‘opportunity pathways’ to break the cycle of crisis support:** funding is imperative to foster community resilience and economic development. The ‘opportunity pathways’ approach harnesses the culture, assets and needs of the local community