In the meantime: why food banks must stop growing and prioritise structural change

A model of operational, social and strategic sustainability for food banks in the UK, shaped by lessons from the United States and Canada

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Contents

Key terms used in the report

The term **food bank** is used differently in the UK, US and Canada. In the US, food banks gather and supply food to pantries, the organisations which distribute it directly to individuals to take home. In Canada, most food banks provide food directly to people, though larger ones also support other hunger relief programmes, including smaller food banks. In the UK, most food banks operate independently of each other, gathering and distributing food themselves. Unless referring to a specific example, I am using the UK definition of food banks.

When I use the term **poverty**, I am using Joseph Rowntree Foundation's definition: when a person's resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation). I use the terms **hunger** and **hardship** to describe the day-to-day experience of poverty.

When referencing research that uses the term **food insecurity**, I've used that language. The Food Standards Agency defines food insecurity as limited or uncertain access to adequate food. This includes not knowing where your next meal will come from, eating less, or having to make difficult trade-offs to get by.

ABUNDANCE FOOD PANTRY – CLEVELAND – OHIO – U.S.

The ‘drive-through’ pantry is hard to miss. I’m walking in the direction of the church when I spot the line of cars snaking around the car park out front. Ray, sitting by the entrance, looks up and smiles as I approach. He greets me with an easy warmth, rising from his chair and leading me inside to meet Paul, who oversees the operation. Inside, it’s busy and noisy, with about twenty volunteers moving boxes, sorting donations, and packing parcels.

In a quiet corner, Paul shares how he first got involved ten years ago. Back then, the church hosted weekly lunches, where he and the other volunteers would sit and eat with their neighbours. As he talks, he recalls some of the stories the regulars used to share that still make him smile. His storytelling is infectious, and I find myself laughing along.

Paul’s tone shifts as he explains how rising need eventually forced the church to stop the lunches and set up the pantry instead. Paul stares straight ahead, his voice flattening as he begins to list the reasons – SNAP entitlements, local housing policies, low wages, a history of racialised policies. Before Paul can say more, two volunteers approach and interrupt us.

With minutes to go before the service begins, a truck hasn’t arrived, but a pallet of ‘mystery meat’ has, frozen in clumps and unlabelled. It takes a brief debate to conclude it’s (probably) minced turkey. Paul quickly assigns volunteers to portion it and walks off, muttering calculations as he revises what will go into each parcel to account for the missing stock.

Feeling a bit out of place, I head back outside to find Ray and offer to lend a hand. The service is about to begin, and the line now spills out of the car park, stretching down the street and around the block. When I ask if this is typical, Ray laughs and tells me that it’s a quiet day. The first cars always arrive around 8 o’clock, two and a half hours early, and he estimates about sixty cars will be in line at any time. For those joining now, it’ll be at least an hour’s wait.

Then the operation springs into action. Two cars are waved forward at a time. Their boots are opened and pre-packed parcels, identical for everyone, are loaded inside. Ray and I add extra items – red cabbages, onions, and bottles of oil – as last-minute additions that arrived after Paul had finalised the parcels. A minute later, the cars move on, and the next two pull up.

Next to us is Rosie, who greets each driver and collects their slip, on which they self-declare their income. She has a gift for making people feel at ease, creating a bubble of safety within seconds. Rosie remembers something about everyone – dogs, children, distant cousins – and asks after each of them. Even after an hour, Rosie is giving each car the same energy and warmth as when I first arrived, though I can tell she’s getting tired. I go over to stand with her.

Beside Rosie, I see that, despite the welcome, most drivers keep their heads bowed, avoiding eye contact. I feel uncomfortable intruding on this moment. Just as I’m contemplating stepping away, a commotion breaks out. A man gets out of his car, calmly announcing that he’ll load the groceries himself. Someone starts shouting about the rules and the penalty for breaking them. Rosie quickly diffuses the tension, shifting the conversation to their shared love of the rock music playing on the radio. The man gets back in his car, and the moment passes.

Next is a pick-up truck, shiny and clearly quite new. A volunteer from the back arrives with fresh supplies and, as the truck pulls away, mutters something about bad credit decisions. Ray gently counters, suggesting the driver might have recently lost his job. “Or,” the volunteer replies, “maybe he’s gaming the system.” I glance at the queue of people waiting for parcels which might, or might not, include “mystery meat.” It strikes me as a grim game to play.

Introduction

Five years ago, as COVID-19 took hold, I wanted to do something to help. I left London and moved to Orkney to lead a project supporting residents on the isles. When travel restrictions cut off access to supermarkets, hundreds were left unable to afford the essentials. Our team responded quickly, turning shipping containers and vans into makeshift pantries. Even as restrictions eased, the need remained, so we began seeking funding to keep them going.

That was when I first heard from Katy, who works for Trussell. She explained that Trussell had shifted its vision from a food bank in every town to a UK without the need for them. With care, Katy questioned whether expanding the pantries was the best use of our time. The real issue, she argued, was insufficient income and government policy, so our efforts should focus on getting more money into people's pockets. That conversation overhauled our approach.

Working with partners, Orkney Foodbank and community members, we developed a strategy and secured funding for a partnership project to offer cash-first support and holistic advice to people in crisis. We called on the council to do more and worked with them to improve access to the Scottish Welfare Fund, which led to more people in crisis getting cash.

That work then led me to a role at Trussell, supporting food bank leaders in Scotland to explore their role in ending the need for food banks. For three years I supported those leaders to build partnerships, innovate, and speak out, and it felt like we were part of something monumental: the Scottish Government developed a plan towards ending the need for food banks, cost of living payments evidenced the impact of cash-first support, and then Labour pledged to end mass reliance on emergency food in its manifesto. For a moment, our vision felt within reach.

Before it didn't. The levels of need that peaked during COVID-19 stayed stubbornly high. Food bank leaders spoke of seeing suffering that was bleaker than ever. Labour's refusal to lift the two-child limit appeared to signal business as usual. The hope we had began to fade.

Searching for what to do next, I began engaging more with learning from organisations like A Menu for Change, Trussell and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) on what else food banks could do to push for change. Along the way, I kept stumbling across stories from the US and Canada, where food banks have existed for much longer. I was soon drawn into the history of food banking itself, something I hadn't given much thought to before. I learned that the model began in the US in 1967, before spreading across the country and into Canada. In that longer history, I saw something that gave me hope, a more established countermovement of food bankers trying to do things differently, with decades of experience to show us what could work. With funding from the Churchill Fellowship, I travelled to meet them in late 2024.

They were as inspiring and knowledgeable as I'd hoped, but somewhat unexpectedly, it was the system around them that struck me most. I knew it would be intense, but I hadn't grasped just how vast and entrenched it would be. Food banking in North America is industrial. The buildings are monolithic, the sector is everywhere, and it all feels so permanent. It has become the social safety net. It felt like a terrifying glimpse of our future, if we fail to turn the tide on food banks.

As I moved across the continent, I saw the human cost: a homeless family sheltering by traffic lights, their baby no more than a few months old; sprawling encampments in downtown Vancouver; disabled people asking if they qualified for medically assisted dying because life in poverty had become so unbearable; a mother describing how armed guards searched her three-year-old when she applied for food stamps. The risk of that future became hard to ignore.

I wanted to explain the experience away as a difference in political context, but those I met urged me to confront the role food banking itself had played in shaping those politics. After decades of appeals to keep this multi-billion-dollar sector afloat, the belief that more stock can solve hunger and that food banks will always exist has lodged in public understanding, even as food bankers speak out to say otherwise. The conversation is dominated by awe at the generosity that fills food bank shelves rather than anger at the cruelty that keeps them needed.

As operations have scaled, food banks across the US and Canada now rely on mass corporate donations to top up what communities give. In the US, most also receive government support. Many highlighted how this has further entrenched the distorted politics of hunger. Corporations donate surplus food in exchange for tax relief, public praise and, for some, protection from scrutiny over the exploitative practices that drive people to need food banks in the first place. Governments use their funding as evidence of action, even as they dismantle social security.

At first, these felt like systems so different to our own. Over the last decade, we've seen a profound strategic shift among food bankers in the UK. Across our sector there is now an acute awareness of the risks of becoming institutionalised and, though it is sometimes understood differently, a strong shared commitment to ending the need for our services. Even as COVID-19 sharply increased the need for food banks, our growth felt contained because it sat within the context of that shift and, alongside support, we were investing millions in structural change.

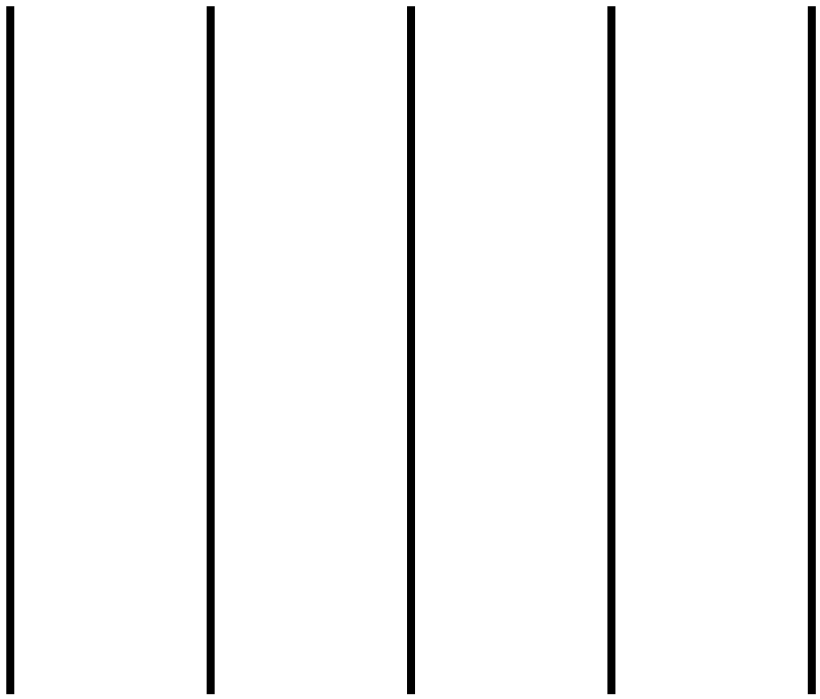
Then, as I spent more time in food banks, I began to see an unnerving familiarity in some of the decisions we've made in the last year or so. As the surge in support our sector enjoyed during the pandemic came to an end, need remained high but community donations struggled to keep up. In response, we've seen food banks and those that support them spend millions on food, and new forms of growth have emerged, including professionalised fundraising, collective bulk purchasing, mass corporate donations, and centralised infrastructure. Despite the strategic shift we've undertaken, these trends came to feel like signs we could be drifting into the wake of North America, pulled along by the same pressures that shaped their systems over decades.

This report argues that these trends demand urgent and collective reflection. Whilst recognising that they are an understandable response from leaders focused on helping people today, it calls for us to consider our impact more holistically. It proposes a decision-making framework to help us do so, calling for food banks, and the organisations that support them, to more intentionally balance operational, social and strategic sustainability. That means continuing to meet immediate need while protecting the resources required for structural change and trying to minimise the harm food banking can cause. In practice, this means defining a limit to support, establishing a boundary to overall growth, and investing more in structural change.

This report begins by exploring five uncomfortable truths about food banking that underpin these risks. It then outlines the moment we find ourselves in and makes the case for adapting this definition of sustainability. Finally, it offers three initial steps that a food bank leader could make to start applying the framework, illustrated with learning from North America.

Although I don't work in a food bank, I consider myself a food banker, and for that reason I have used the term 'we' throughout. At the same time, I recognise the limits of that identity. I can only empathise with the exhaustion felt on the frontline, and I am not the one who, if we establish a boundary, might have to tell someone there is not enough food. This report is primarily for food bank leaders – those who run these services and have that perspective and experience – to equip them in leading the conversation about our sector's future.

Five uncomfortable truths we need to confront



1. We are political

GREATER CHICAGO FOOD DEPOSITORY – CHICAGO – ILLINOIS – U.S.

The building is staggering. At over 300,000 square feet, it could comfortably fit Trafalgar Square inside, twice. From the vantage point of a walkway, we look down on towering shelves stacked high with food. A lorry is reversing into the loading docks, and another is getting ready to leave. If I shouted at the top of my voice, I doubt the sound would carry to those at the far end.

This isn't normal

Neighbours, congregations, and communities have always looked after one another. Food is central to our survival and culture, so it's no surprise that there is a long history of food assistance, from tins at the back of the church, to breadlines and soup kitchens. We share with those before us a repulsion at the idea of anyone going hungry.

Yet those early volunteers would barely recognise our support today. What was once informal, neighbourly help has shifted into a professionalised and ever-expanding system of emergency food. The food bank model, imported from North America, now coordinates the gathering, transport, and distribution of donated food on an unprecedented scale, as volunteers and frontline workers attempt to plug the growing void left by our crumbling social security system.

Before the 2000s, food banks were almost unheard of in the UK (Lambie-Mumford, 2017). Trussell, now the largest food bank network, started its social franchise in 2004. At first it grew slowly, radiating outwards from Salisbury through church networks (Battarbee, 2024). By 2010/11, 35 centres had been set up across the UK (Sosenko, Bramley, & Bhattacharjee, 2022).

Then the network surged. By 2013/14 the number of centres had grown to 650 and to over 1,200 by 2019/20 (Sosenko, Bramley, & Bhattacharjee, 2022). Figures on food parcels show a similar trend. In 2010/11, Trussell distributed 61,000 parcels (Sosenko, et al., 2019). Last year, 2023/4, it distributed over 3.1 million (Trussell, 2024). This is a 50-fold increase in just over ten years. Beyond Trussell, estimates now put the total number of food banks in the UK at over 7,000.[1]

Whilst we, as food bankers, spend so much of our time thinking about the individuals we support, we need to think at a bigger scale to understand this rapid growth.

Food banks are a structural problem

People use food banks because they don't have enough money to buy food. Often the people we support are blamed for this, described as 'shirkers and scroungers' (Garthwaite, 2016), too lazy to work, or incapable of managing a budget. Fortunately, as food bankers, we have the evidence from our data, and the stories we hear from those we support, to know this isn't true.

The UK's largest study on food bank use found that 94% of people referred to Trussell food banks were experiencing destitution (Sosenko, et al., 2019), meaning they couldn't afford the essentials we all need to eat, stay warm, and keep clean. Trussell (2023) identifies the biggest driver of this destitution as the design and delivery of our social security system – it is hard to access, complex to navigate, and no longer provides sufficient income for people to live on.

[1] This includes the 1,400 food bank centres operated by Trussell (Trussell, n.d.), the 1,172 independent food banks mapped by IFAN (IFAN, n.d.) and 4,000 that are estimated to be operating in schools (Baker, Knight, & Leckie, 2024). Food banks also operate in other settings, including universities and the NHS.

Many assume work prevents food insecurity, but the same report found that one in five (20%) people referred were from working households, with insecure jobs like zero-hour contracts strongly linked to food insecurity (Trussell, 2023). Others want to work but face barriers, particularly disabled people, those with caring responsibilities, and mothers (Trussell, 2023).

Austerity explains the dramatic rise of food banks

It's important to remember that social security, and protections for workers, haven't always been so weak and dysfunctional. They have been eroded and undermined by decades of government policy, which cumulated in the devastating austerity politics of the 2010s.

The highest number of food bank openings followed the Welfare Reform Act of 2012 (Beck & Gwilym, 2023). Evidence now directly links this reform to rising food bank need, specifically changes to welfare conditionality (Beck & Gwilym, 2023), rates and eligibility (Sosenko, Bramley, & Bhattacharjee, 2022), and sanctions (Loopstra et al., 2018).

We see the link between austerity and food bank use in the global history of food banking too. It was economic recession and Reagan's harsh social security cuts in the 1980s that caused pantries and food banks to proliferate in the US (Poppendieck, 1998). In Germany, food banks grew more sharply after welfare reforms in 2005 than after the global recession (Selke, 2013).

The rise of food banks is the story of how government dismantled the post-war systems we built together to support one another in hard times, stripping away the protections that kept people from experiencing destitution in the aftermath of illness, unemployment or crisis.

Poverty is intersectional

Austerity may be the clearest driver behind the rise of food banks, but it also interacts with existing inequalities, including those related to class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, health, experiences of care, experiences of asylum, and geography. We are not born with an equal chance of experiencing poverty or needing to use a food bank.

Trussell's *Hunger in the UK* report (2023) found that over a quarter of disabled people (26%) experience food insecurity – nearly three times the rate of non-disabled people (10%) – with 69% of those referred to Trussell food banks being disabled. It showed food insecurity also affects one in four (24%) people from ethnic minorities, nearly double the rate for white people (13%), and 27% of LGBTQ+ individuals, more than twice the rate for heterosexual people (13%).

These figures reflect the impact of long-standing injustices and unequal treatment which, like austerity, can be traced back to decisions made by those in power. For those of us focused on a future without food banks, we must recognise and respond to this intersectionality too.

We are political

As we reflect on our history, it's clear we are entangled with politics. We exist because of austerity, an ideology that has gutted public services and stripped support from those in need. As one of its most visible symbols, food banks are closely watched, and what we say and do carries weight. If we stay silent, it looks like we accept the status quo. When we speak out about why we're here, we help others see our existence isn't inevitable. If we mirror the cold, bureaucratic systems that drive people to us, we risk making that indifference feel normal. When we practise care and connection, we create space to imagine a society that puts people first. If we present ourselves as the solution, we enable government retreat. When we make clear the limits of our support, we can galvanise our communities to come together for change.

2. We don’t reach most people

NEIGHBORS TOGETHER – NEW YORK CITY – NEW YORK – U.S

The room is set up café-style, with clusters of tables and chairs, but they’re buried under boxes. Four years ago, this space hosted daily community meals. Everyone ate together inside, and the team mingled with the community. COVID dramatically changed that. Now meals are handed out at the front door, and the café is used for storage. A long line forms outside each day, with people arriving hours early, hoping to get something before it runs out, as it often does.

Most people never walk through our doors

Despite the staggering scale of food banking now seen in the UK, most people who experience food insecurity never step foot inside a food bank (Loopstra & Lambie-Mumford, 2023).

In the Department for Work and Pensions’ recent *Family Resources Survey* for 2023/2024, which surveyed just under 17,000 households across the UK, 5% were found to be experiencing very low food security in the last thirty days, meaning they had reduced their food intake or experienced disrupted eating due to a lack of money or resources (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025). Among this group, only 16% had used a food bank within the last thirty days, and 30% within the last twelve months (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025).

Despite there being far more pantries and food banks in the US and Canada, we can see the same pattern there too. In Canada, for example, one landmark study has shown that only a fifth of those experiencing food insecurity use a food bank (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2015).

We can’t grow our way out of this

Our instinct might be to increase provision, or to make our services more accessible or appealing. For some, barriers like location or opening hours can prevent access (Sosenko, Bramley, & Bhattacharjee, 2022), but the reality is that we can never be everywhere we’re needed. Food banks are already struggling to raise stock or recruit enough volunteers, and those on the frontline are exhausted. More importantly, the problem isn’t just about logistics.

Research has shown that many people do not want to access food banks, waiting until they’ve gone without food and have absolutely no other choice (Loopstra & Lambie-Mumford, 2023; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012). Some internalise the narrative of poverty as a personal failing (Garthwaite, 2016), immobilised from seeking support by the shame they feel. Others cannot bear the judgement of being assessed by strangers, or even neighbours, as to whether they are ‘deserving’ of food to eat. There is an inherent indignity in relying on the charity of others to survive, however dignified it tries to be, which many cannot overcome.

We need to stop trying to reach everybody

This leaves us with an unresolvable tension. The number of people who need support because their income doesn’t cover the essentials will always be greater than the numbers we reach. That gap creates a constant sense of insufficiency, a feeling that we should be doing more, even as we are already stretched to our limits. It also feeds a scarcity mindset, where we fear there won’t be enough, which keeps us anxious, reactive, and trapped in the urgency of the moment. We will never reach everyone through direct support, and we must stop chasing that impossible goal; doing so gives us permission to set boundaries, and it strengthens the case for focusing our time and energy on the structural change that could reach and impact far more people.

3. We can't solve the problem

FEED ONTARIO – TORONTO - ONTARIO – CANADA

Carolyn leads a food bank network called Feed Ontario. Last year, they provided training for their members on trauma-informed care after a growing number of disabled people began asking food banks about how to apply for medical assistance in dying. They were telling volunteers that life in poverty as a disabled person was so unbearable that they would rather die. When the story reached the press, there was minimal reaction and no public outrage.

Food parcels are a sticking plaster, not a solution

What about the millions who do access our support? For them, a food parcel can be a lifeline, a tangible intervention that ensures they can eat that night and stretch their budget further. But on its own, it won't lift them out of food insecurity or poverty. As we've seen, the biggest driver of food insecurity and food bank use is low income, and a food parcel won't change that. If Universal Credit doesn't provide you with enough money to cover the essentials, it still won't when the food parcel runs out. And so, the cycle repeats itself.

Holistic support won't solve the problem either

Most food bank leaders understand this limitation, and few now only offer a food parcel. Many ensure there is time and space for a 'cup of tea', so that people feel safe, heard and valued. This is often accompanied by signposting or referring the individual to organisations who can provide specialist advice and support in relation to their circumstance. Within the Trussell community, most food bank organisations have now been funded to commission money advice and support services that operate directly in their food bank sessions.

The impact of this wider support is significant. An evaluation of these Trussell-funded services found that in a one-year period, 38,685 people had gained an average of £1,700 in income after support (Finney et al., 2024). Yet despite these gains, many still faced destitution and needed to use a food bank (Finney et al., 2024). Even with access to entitlements, people are navigating a social security system that doesn't provide enough to cover the essentials. People's income increases, but not by enough to lift them out of poverty.

Structural problems need structural solutions

The structural problems we have identified need structural solutions. Whilst we can make a meaningful and positive difference in people's lives, we cannot end the need for food banks without government action. Only government can determine the level and administration of social security and set the legal frameworks that define and enforce fair work and pay.

We saw the potential of government action during COVID-19 when a temporary £20 uplift was applied to some Universal Credit recipients, significantly reducing rates of food insecurity among this group (Loopstra et al., 2025). Trussell's research shows that setting Universal Credit at a rate that guarantees the recipient has enough to afford the essentials (currently calculated as £120 a week for a single adult) would reduce the numbers at risk of hunger and hardship by 20%, helping 1.9 million people (Weekes et al., 2024). Ensuring everyone received their full social security entitlement would lift 635,000 people out of hardship, while scrapping both the two-child limit and benefit cap would help a further 825,000 (Weekes et al., 2024). We know how to end the need for food banks; it's just not government policy yet.

4. We are at risk of undermining the solution

CBC FOOD BANK DAY – VANCOUVER – BRITISH COLUMBIA – CANADA

Each year, CBC (Canada's equivalent of the BBC) hosts a Food Bank Day, a day of broadcasting to raise millions for food banks across the province. This year is the 38th annual event, and the theme is 'making the season kind'. Graham Riches, who has written about the right to food over those four decades, questions whether this is appropriate. When a public broadcaster fundraises for charity, it gives the impression that hunger is politically neutral. As Graham argues, their role is to hold government to account, not to legitimise the response to its failure.

Our collective impact isn't always positive

Even when we recognise our limits, the reality is that government is not acting. In the meantime, it can feel like anything is better than doing nothing. The reality is more complicated. The same actions that help individuals today can, over time, undermine the wider change needed to end the need for food banks by shaping a political landscape where we are seen as the solution.

Food becomes the focus

Over the last fifteen years, our rapid rise and ongoing calls for donations have built us an established profile. With that we've often used the language of hunger to highlight the gravity of need, and images of empty shelves to convey the strain we are under. The unintended result is that some now see the problem as there simply not being enough food, rather than recognising the structural factors that leave people without enough money to afford it (Fisher, 2017).

Donations dampen political action

This focus not only leads to a misdiagnosis of the problem but also shapes how the public respond. As Janet Poppendieck (1998) observes, donating food becomes an obvious and emotionally satisfying response, a tangible way to help and to relieve the discomfort people feel when faced with destitution. Poppendieck describes food banks as a 'moral safety valve'. People feel they've done their part, and the visibility of food banks reassures the public that no one will starve. As a result, the resolve to question and challenge the injustices that drive the need for food banks is weakened.

Charity erodes expectations of government

Food banks also redefine what we think is normal. In a functioning social security system, help is an entitlement: predictable, universal, and rooted in mutual responsibility. In contrast, food parcels are a gift, where access depends on availability, eligibility, and the discretion of others (Lambie-Mumford, 2019). This shift normalises the idea that survival is a matter of generosity rather than a fundamental right. Over time, this erodes the expectation that the government should guarantee our basic needs, making food banks feel like an inevitable response to poverty, rather than a symbol of our failure to prevent it.

Food banks can shape the political environment

All this shapes a political environment in which government arguably feels less pressure to act on the structural causes of poverty. As food banks become more normalised, politicians may even feel able to make further cuts to social security, confident the public will expect food banks to absorb some of the harm.

5. We are at a crossroads

DAILY BREAD – TORONTO – ONTARIO – CANADA

In the warehouse, each volunteer is equipped with a handheld barcode scanner, guiding them around the huge hall. Linked to a sophisticated computer system, it calculates what to pack based on historical data, projections, nutritional goals, and value for money targets. This is all part of an operation which has grown massively in the last five years. In 2019, Daily Bread spent $1 million on food. In 2024 it spent $29 million.

We need to make some big decisions

UK food banks are under severe strain. Numbers accessing support remain high, barely falling from the rise seen during COVID-19, while community food donations have failed to keep pace (BBC, 2022; Trussell, 2025; IFAN, 2025). To delay a shortfall, many food banks have been purchasing food, often from reserves. In the Trussell community, purchased food has risen from 2% of all distributed food in 2019–2020, to 26% in 2024–2025 (Battarbee, 2024). This has temporarily plugged the gap, but the money will run out. When it does, the options left to increase food and income will risk further entrenching food banks and the drivers of need.

Every pound spent on food is a pound not spent on structural change

Before even considering how to sustain this new scale of spending, we first need to recognise the opportunity cost of the large sums currently going on food. That money could instead strengthen the support we offer beyond food, funding more roles that provide relational support and specialist advice. It could also resource structural work, such as advocacy, with the potential to reach more people and deliver lasting change.

The pressure to raise more food risks obscuring our message

If food banks do continue spending these sums on food, they will likely need to ask the public for further support. Maintaining balance is critical in order to minimise the potential harm we've explored. Public appeals should frame emergency food as the first step in a wider response that must include political action (White, 2024). The risk is that, as pressure grows and fundraising becomes a larger, more professionalised function, this balance is disrupted by the drive to secure more food and funds. This is evident in the US, where food banks have been highly successful in attracting donations, but often through messaging that presents the individual experience of hunger as the problem and emergency food as the solution (Fisher, 2017).

Collective food purchasing creates more permanent infrastructure

To stretch funds further, some food banks have begun pooling resources to buy food collectively, and specialist platforms have emerged to do this on the behalf of providers. It is understandable why. In North America, articulated lorries, huge warehouses and supply chain specialists make food banking highly efficient, yet these are the same features that also make the system vast, deeply embedded and hard to imagine dismantling. Centralised infrastructure is far more permanent than local, community-based food raising. In these models there is also a risk that cost takes priority over the environmental, social or nutritional harm tied to cheap food. This way of working also creates additional risks. If, for example, food banks, or those that supply them, begin to rely on imported food or just-in-time supply chains, they could become vulnerable to unexpected supply chain shocks.

Accepting government funding would normalise government inaction

In the US, government funding has provided an alternative income stream for food banks, but it is something we should resist. This funding creates the perception that poverty is a problem for communities to solve rather than government (Riches, 1997), and it allows politicians to point to a small investment in food as evidence of action, while avoiding investment in the structural solutions we know is needed. By accepting funding, we undermine our ability to challenge that.

Corporate partners don't always share our goals

Corporations have played a significant role in the history of food banks in the UK, where donation baskets and supermarket collection days have enabled individual giving at scale, but as we consider further growth, this relationship deserves renewed attention. In the US, decades of corporate partnerships show where deeper entanglement can lead. Andy Fisher (2017) describes this relationship as a 'Hunger Industrial Complex', in which food banks now rely heavily on donations from large corporations. While many of these partnerships may be driven by genuine concern – as well as the tax relief and public praise they bring – there is also a risk that some businesses use the relationship to deflect scrutiny from practices, such as low wages, that drive people to food banks in the first place. In the process, whether intentional or not, the focus also stays on donated food rather than on structural responses, such as higher wages, that might challenge corporate interests (Lambie-Mumford & Kennedy, 2024).

Food waste further distracts from the solution

These donations often consist of surplus food businesses no longer want, celebrated as a win-win that cuts both food waste and poverty. In reality, this normalises a two-tier food system, where people in poverty are expected to survive on food not considered saleable, rather than having the same choice and dignity as everyone else (Caraher & Furey, 2017). Much of this food is also poor quality. A recent survey by Foodrise (2024) found 91% of food aid workers had to dispose of business donations because they were damaged or inedible, often at significant cost. People in poverty need more money in their pockets, not leftovers.

If we grow, we are likely to keep growing

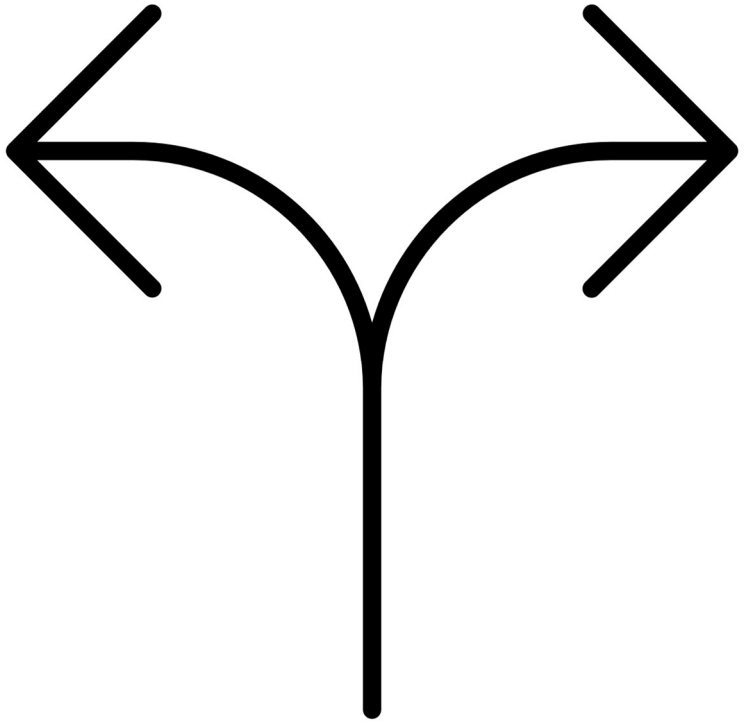
If we engage with any of these options, we need to recognise that growth can become self-perpetuating. As we get larger, we amplify the potential for harm we've already identified, helping to entrench the systems that drive need. Growth also shifts internal dynamics. Specialist roles emerge, focused on sourcing food, whose success is judged by the volumes they secure. This introduces new priorities into leadership and decision-making spaces. Without a clear boundary, stopping anywhere can also feel arbitrary, because each further expansion is easy to justify in the same way as the last.

Our teams are already stretched

We also need to think about the impact on frontline volunteers and staff. Many are exhausted from the surge in need since 2020 and the ongoing emotional toll of witnessing trauma; Walker et al. (2025) describe how they are experiencing 'moral injury'. Staff and volunteers are forced to make impossible decisions about who gets support, often without training or any framework to guide them. They must carry the weight of knowing that what they can offer is not enough, and that their work may be prolonging government inaction. Growth will not ease this tension. Instead, those on the frontline need training and guidance to intentionally manage limits, and to feel part of a collective effort to bring about lasting, structural change.

GREATER CHICAGO FOOD DEPOSITORY – ILLINOIS - UNITED STATES *Credit: Author*

Setting a new direction



What I saw in North America

In the US and Canada, I met extraordinary food bank staff and volunteers, much like those I know here: people who step forward when no one else does, combining deep care with skill and stubborn determination to help people in crisis feel safe and find stability. What differed was the system they worked within. Food banking in North America is so vast and established that few now imagine a future without it. The debate centres on how to stop things getting even worse, rather than on the policy changes required to overhaul the broken systems that make food banks necessary. The expansion of food banking has not reduced poverty or hunger in either country. The suffering of those they serve is even more acute and normalised.

This didn't emerge overnight

The more I learned about the history of food banking in North America, the more unsettled I became. Despite our different contexts, the beginnings felt all too familiar. Neighbours gathered around a kitchen table, agreeing to set up a cupboard at the back of a church. An occasional drop-in that became a regular food bank. Then came the slow progression, growing to fill vast warehouses and operating fleets of lorries. Every food banker I met shared our belief that food banks shouldn't have to exist, and no one celebrated the size of food banking. These systems weren't planned, and they didn't emerge overnight. They grew through hundreds of decisions, each making sense in the moment to ensure there was enough food for everyone.

The same actions which helped also caused harm

As is true here, government bears ultimate responsibility for the harm those food bankers were responding to. But this history also shows how the growth of food banking may have helped reinforce the conditions that allowed this government neglect. A food parcel means someone eats that night, but the cumulative impact of millions of parcels – and the infrastructure built to deliver them over five decades – has been to normalise charity, shift attention away from structural change, and erode expectations of government's responsibilities. As food banks became more entangled with corporate partnerships and government funding, and scaled their food and fundraising operations, that only became worse.

We are drifting into a new era of food banking

There is a risk we are following a similar path. As community donations continue to lag and need remains high, food banks have been spending millions on food and growing their fundraising functions to sustain it. We've seen a surge in corporate donations. Some food banks are establishing collective buying schemes to cut costs, building larger and more permanent shared infrastructure in the process, and often prioritising savings over the potential harms of cheap food. These feel like signs of a drift into new era of food banking.

We need a framework to navigate this moment

Like our transatlantic counterparts, many of these decisions have been made by individual leaders responding to a fast-moving situation, focused on ensuring there is enough food for everyone who needs it. That instinct is understandable. But if we want to avoid following the same trajectory as North America, we need a decision-making framework for food banks and the organisations that support them that is designed for this moment. It must take a more holistic view of impact, balancing our calling to support people today with the consequences of our presence and continued growth. It must also help us weigh the resources committed to emergency food against the time, funding and focus needed to bring about structural change.

We need to redefine what it means to be sustainable

This framework should redefine what it means to be sustainable as a food bank, holding three forms of sustainability in balance: operational, social and strategic. I define these as:

> **Operational sustainability:** being able to support a defined number of people without exhausting your team, depleting your funds or running out of food.
>
> **Social sustainability:** resourcing and providing emergency food without entrenching the systems that drive future need. For example, avoiding the creation of permanent infrastructure or anything that distorts the public's understanding of poverty.
>
> **Strategic sustainability:** protecting the time, money and independence needed to pursue structural change that addresses the root causes of poverty.

These are not new priorities, but the framework calls us to weigh them together, more intentionally, in every decision we make, so that short and long-term impact carry equal importance. When applied to the pressures we face now, the framework points to:

1. Establishing a collective boundary to the overall scale of emergency food provision in the UK, recognising that further expansion would risk even greater social harm.
2. Food banks, and the organisations that support them, stepping back from sources of food and efficiencies that carry additional political, social or environmental cost.
3. Food banks giving strategic sustainability equal weight in decision-making and, where this is not yet happening, investing time and funding in structural change work.

This does not mean shutting our doors overnight. It means continuing to serve our communities but doing so at a scale and in a way that minimises the unintended harm we may cause, while staying focused on the change that could end the need for food banks altogether.

We must define a limit to our support

These boundaries will require food banks to define a limit to their support, whether by holding at current levels or reducing provision if they choose to reconsider developments introduced in recent years. As well as protecting social sustainability, a limit can strengthen operational sustainability by creating greater predictability and safeguarding staff and volunteer wellbeing. It also supports strategic sustainability by freeing up time and money for structural change.

Establishing a boundary is the right thing to do, even if it leaves people without support

Rebalancing our priorities and setting limits to our support is a crucial step in shifting responsibility back to government. Even if they do not act immediately, and there is a risk some people go without support, it is the right thing to do. Government must be held accountable for any harm, just as they should be held responsible for the millions already experiencing hunger, including those who never set foot in a food bank. Our responsibility lies in the choices we make, which means being accountable if we choose to grow, knowing the harm it could cause.

The window for change is narrow

Rebalancing our priorities, so structural change becomes a larger part of what food banks do, is especially urgent in the short window we have left of a Labour government that committed to ending mass reliance on emergency food. If we cannot persuade this government to act, it is hard to see when the opportunity will come again. If they fail to deliver on their promise, we'll look back on this period as a key milestone in the institutionalisation of food banks.

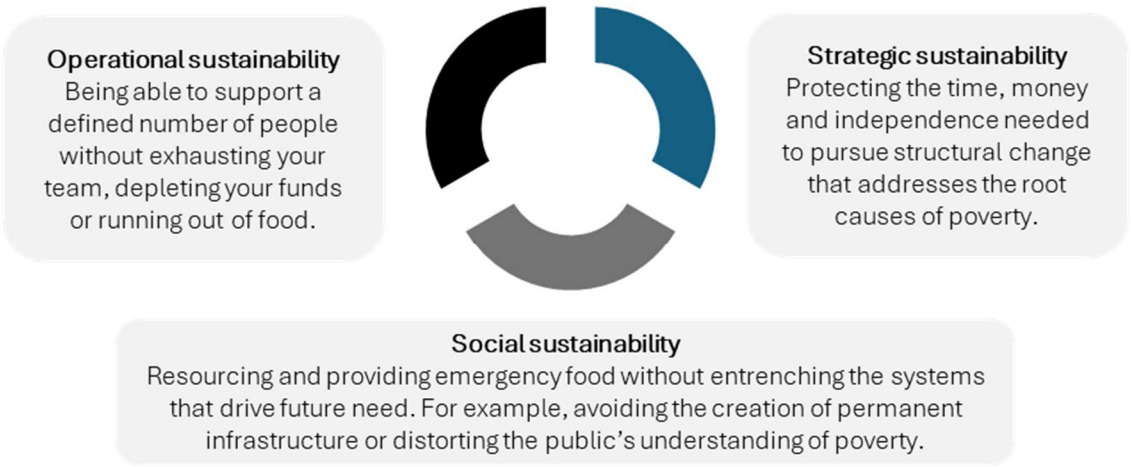


Figure 1 Forms of sustainability we must hold in balance to maximise impact and minimise harm

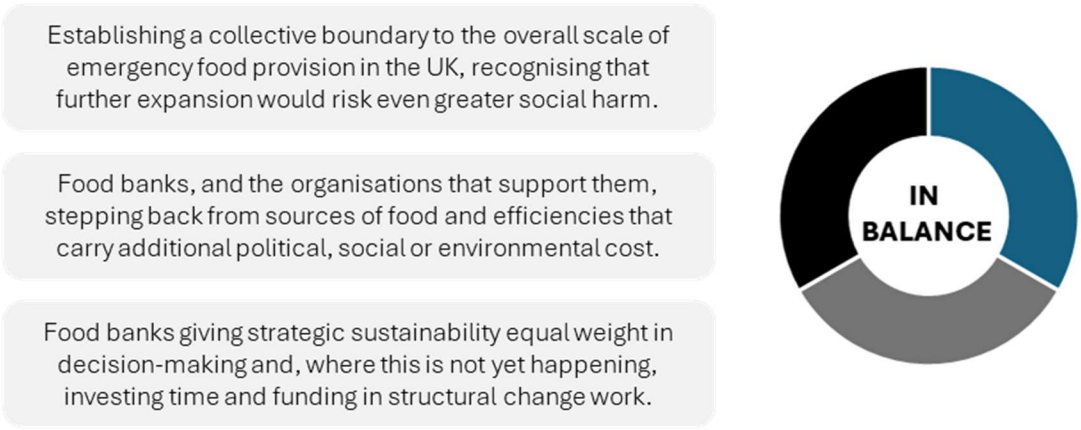


Figure 2 Actions needed to hold the three forms of sustainability in balance

Our next steps

The rest of this report offers practical ideas for food bank leaders who want to engage in this shift. It outlines three foundational steps: preparing your organisation for change, establishing a boundary to limit growth, and centring structural change. While presented in sequence, these steps are closely connected, and you may find yourself moving between them. I've written with those new to this shift in mind, so if you've already begun, there may be sections you skip.

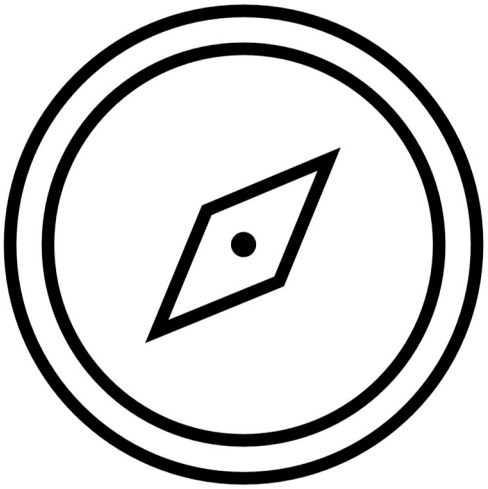
The ideas are illustrated with examples and learning from food bankers I visited in the US and Canada. Many could be matched by UK examples, but I have chosen not to include them. This Fellowship focused on North America, and I believe there is value in sharing stories that may be new to a UK audience. What follows is therefore intended to complement the learning that others, including IFAN and Trussell, are already gathering about how food banks are refocusing their organisations and driving change, here in the UK.

I have also chosen to limit the scope of this report and its recommendations to how we balance operational, social and strategic sustainability. Other important themes I explored during the Fellowship, including how we make support more dignified and connect with wider food systems advocacy, are not included here but deserve attention in their own right elsewhere.

1

Get your organisation ready for change

Embedding this holistic understanding of sustainability will be a significant shift for some food banks. This step outlines how to prepare for that change, focusing on ways to build consensus within your organisation about why it matters and what it can make possible. It also sets out the organisational foundations needed to balance operational, social and strategic sustainability.



Build a shared understanding of poverty in your organisation

Embed a structural understanding of poverty

Understanding the need to balance operational, social and strategic sustainability starts with recognising poverty as a structural issue. People who work or volunteer in food banks often hold different beliefs about why poverty exists, so before introducing this model or discussing how it applies, it's important to build a shared understanding of poverty within your team.

Speak about the root causes of poverty

From their first point of contact, people should know that you see poverty as a systemic failure. At Oregon Food Bank, that message was clear before I even arrived because it was written across their website and embedded in their materials. At the Greater Chicago Food Depository, the first thing I saw were the words above the door: '*We believe food is a basic human right*'. We can embed the message into volunteer inductions, role profiles, and staff handbooks too.

Create space to hear from people who are experiencing poverty

We can also support this collective understanding by making sure everyone has opportunities to engage with people experiencing poverty, recognising that not every role naturally provides this. At Greater Cleveland Food Bank, volunteers are encouraged to spend part of their shift alongside people using the service, offering support and conversation. When I visited, I met Joel, a volunteer whose understanding of poverty has been shaped by time spent alongside people at the food banks. As a result, Joel was motivated to get involved in advocacy work.

Invite someone who has used your food bank to speak at a volunteer meeting, so that everybody can hear and understand the reasons people need to use your services.

Introduce a broader understanding of inequity

At Northwest Harvest and Oregon Food Bank, equity work has also been central to building a structural mindset. Exploring how race, gender, sexuality, immigration status and other characteristics shape people's lives helped teams begin thinking in terms of systems. Both organisations started with internal training. Over time, a deeper understanding of structural inequality informed recruitment, shaped decision-making, and guided advocacy. They also create regular spaces for open discussion, which has helped teams reflect on these themes, adapt their work, and shift organisational culture.

Arrange equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) training and create space for your team to reflect on how systems like racism, ableism or class shape people's lives.

Prepare for some people to leave

As we deepen our understanding of poverty as structural, not everyone will come with us. Some may remain focused on explanations which blame the individual. Some will choose to leave, whilst we may feel that others no longer align with our new direction. Those I met in North America who had navigated change were clear about this. They made space for learning but recognised when ongoing resistance pointed to a deeper misalignment. All were comfortable that people leaving was an inevitable part of any significant organisational shift.

Add a question about the causes of poverty to your recruitment process to ensure alignment with your organisation's position going forward.

Encourage your team to reflect on the work of your food bank

Create space to reflect and discuss your work

As this structural understanding develops, introduce the five uncomfortable truths we've explored and the operational, social and strategic sustainability model to your team. Encourage them to think about how these ideas relate to how your food bank operates. Rather than projecting conclusions, share information and give people space to explore it together. At one food bank I visited, the leadership team used this approach with a sceptical board. They shared data on the cost of feeding everyone experiencing poverty in their area, then gave their actual budget, which was much smaller. Unprompted, the group identified the limits of spending it all on emergency food and began exploring ways to invest in structural change instead.

Create space for reflection outside of day-to-day operations, for example, by organising a day for trustees, staff and volunteers to step back and think together about these bigger questions.

Reframe your relationship to those you support

There are also some important conversations that we should facilitate with our teams. One is how we relate to the people we support, and how the traditional charity model creates a divide between giver and receiver. Encourage your team to reflect on how this framing reinforces the idea of poverty as an individual issue, rather than a systemic one. Explore together how an alternative framing – that we are all members of the same community, facing an injustice bigger than any of us – might shift the way you work. At Feeding America, staff use the word 'neighbour' to describe those they support, as a way of reinforcing this framing.

Reclaim what it means to be political

Another important conversation to start is what it means to be political, especially as we begin to name the political decisions that create the need for food banks. Teams need to understand that politics isn't just about parties or elections, but the systems that shape people's lives. We should reclaim being political as the act of naming and challenging the structural causes of poverty. Reflecting together on the ways our work is already political can help: a warm welcome sets a standard for how people are treated; supporting someone to access social security can expose systemic failings; and even giving a food parcel can be political if it creates breathing space for someone to challenge the injustices they are experiencing.

Ask staff and volunteers to map out how your activities might shape the actions or decisions of others. Use this to prompt a conversation about the influence you already have.

Redefine how you measure impact

Finally, spend time exploring different ways to think about impact. As you explore the sustainability model, discuss the difference between intended and unintended impact, short and long-term change, and between your impact on individuals and the wider systems around you. If talking about structural change feels abstract, try connecting it to the work you already do and the people you support. When Daily Bread advocated for the Canadian Disability Benefit, they framed the advocacy as an investment. They showed how raising incomes would mean that a significant proportion of those using their services would no longer need the food bank and outlined the resource this would free up for other work.

Ask your team to list all the ways the food bank makes a difference beyond food parcels, including how you want people to feel and how you may already be building awareness.

Develop the foundations for a strategic shift

Develop a strategy

As consensus builds, there should be a shared understanding that your organisation will need to change how it operates, so that you can effectively balance operational, social and strategic sustainability and deliver long-term, lasting impact. The next step is to develop a strategy that outlines the impact you want to have, the activity you will deliver, and how it will be resourced. It should include plans to expand work for structural change, introduce new ways of measuring impact – including unintended impact – and set out how you will resource your work while remaining socially sustainable. It should also define clear limits to the support you provide. You may also want your strategy to address other areas not covered in this report, such as strengthening the support you offer or making your service more dignified. As you develop your strategy, speak to people with lived experience, your community, and partner organisations to understand what is already underway and where you can have the greatest impact.

Create a clear vision for your organisation

As you develop this strategy, it can be helpful to ground your thinking in a clear vision statement, which describes the kind of future you are working towards. Encourage your team to be ambitious, and to think not just about the experience you want people in crisis to have in the future, but what it would take to prevent people from reaching crisis in the first place.

Ask each person in your team to write a postcard from a future in which there is no longer a need for food banks, describing what has changed. Share what you've written with each other.

Define your role

Before mapping the detail of your strategy, it can also be helpful to spend time articulating the role you see your organisation playing in bringing about the future, so that you have an overarching narrative which ties your work together. There is no right or wrong answer here. You might still think of providing emergency food as the most important thing you do, or you might centre something else. Among those I met, North York Harvest Food Bank continued providing emergency food but redefined itself as an anti-poverty charity and began advocacy work. Oregon Food Bank decided its role was to help shift power and began focusing on community organising. The Stop realised that creating spaces for community and relationships was most important to them and stopped describing themselves as a food bank altogether.

Ask each person in your team to describe your organisation in 100 words. Then pair up and agree a shared version. Keep combining until you have one definition everyone supports.

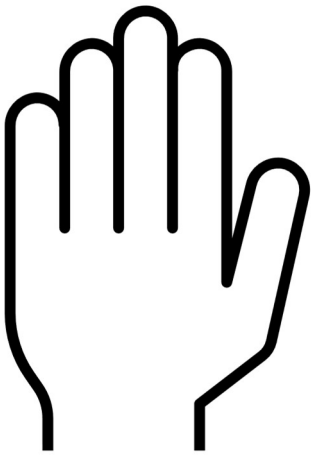
Ensure your board is ready for a strategy shift

Trustees should be involved from the outset and play a leading role in any strategic shift. Once a strategy is in place, it is important to ensure your board is equipped to support the change too, enabling the organisation's ambition whilst managing new risks. A board with a wide range of perspectives is better able to navigate this complexity, and this can be a good moment to recruit, with a focus on increasing diversity. As part of this, purposefully recruiting trustees with lived experience, and ensuring the board operates in a way that is accessible, brings valuable insight from those who understand the problem first-hand. If your organisation has not previously focused on structural change, you may also need to review your charitable objects and ensure trustees understand how charity law applies to campaigning.

2

Establish limits and a boundary to growth

When we apply the lens of operational, social and strategic sustainability in balance, it becomes clear that we must define a limit to our support and establish a boundary to our overall growth. This step outlines how to build the case for this within your organisation and begin defining limits and boundaries in practice. It also highlights the role we all have in making this a sector-wide conversation, to avoid simply displacing growth elsewhere.



Start a conversation about limits and boundaries

Make the case to your team

We need consensus within our teams that defining a limit to our support is the right response to the challenges we face, rather than further growth. That consensus may build naturally as teams reflect on the unintended harms of food banking or as clearer priorities emerge during strategy development. If it doesn't, or some remain unsure, it can help to show the wider benefits that limits could bring, both for your organisation and for the people you support.

As Janet Poppendieck observes, growth creates additional pressure because the larger food banks become, the more food and fundraising infrastructure they need to sustain. Robert Ojeda, who has led two food banks, notes that setting a clear ceiling on the food you distribute brings predictability. It reduces pressure on staff and volunteers and frees up time for work with deeper impact. Limits also enable us to focus on improving support and making it more dignified for those we continue to serve. Reflecting on his time leading a food bank's transition to a Community Food Centre, Nick Saul identified the decision to limit emergency food as the one that freed up the time and resource needed to build deeper relationships, connect people to wider support, and create space for them to speak out about the injustices they faced.

Help build consensus for a boundary across the sector

We all have a role to play in starting a wider conversation across the sector too, so we can begin to establish a collective boundary to the overall scale of emergency food provision in the UK. This includes influencing the decisions made by network and infrastructure organisations operating at a regional or national level on behalf of their members, particularly around mass corporate donations, government funding and shared infrastructure. We can do this by:

- Speaking publicly, especially with other food bankers, about the need for boundaries, and sharing this report to show there is appetite to explore this direction.
- Asking network and infrastructure organisations we are part of to create spaces where members can come together to discuss what a collective boundary would look like.
- Calling on those organisations to co-develop principles with their members, to guide the decisions they make on their behalf around food and fundraising.


Facilitate a summit for local emergency food providers to explore what a collective boundary to growth could look like, including topics such as a shared approach to local authority funding.

Define principles for that boundary

As we make the case for a boundary within our teams and across the sector, we should also try to establish some clear principles for how we approach it in practice. These should include:

Being political	Being collective	Being participatory
As we establish the boundary, we need to speak clearly and publicly about why the problem exists and the harm caused by government inaction. We must help the public understand that our boundary isn't a call for more donations but for meaningful government action.	We need the boundary to be collective, involving as many providers as possible, so that we don't simply shift the need or growth elsewhere. We should create spaces to decide how we navigate the nuances of a boundary and support one another as we do so.	As well as working with other providers, we must create space for those with experience of hunger and hardship to shape what limits look like in practice. Their insight is essential to helping us set boundaries in ways that minimise harm and protect dignity.

Define these limits and boundaries in practice

Use the sustainability framework to guide your decisions

Once there is support for these ideas, the next step is to put them into practice. While setting a sector-wide boundary will take wider collaboration, you can begin monitoring and capping growth within your own organisation, for example by tracking the total volume of food you distribute each year. You can also use the sustainability framework to guide decisions about partnerships, food sourcing, infrastructure and the scale of support you offer, asking:

- Does this decision risk exhausting our team, stock or budget in the months ahead?
- Does it risk distorting the public's understanding of poverty, advancing the interests of organisations unaligned with our goals, or making us more permanent?
- Will we still have the time, money and influence we need for structural change work?

It can also help to agree some clear guidelines in advance to ensure consistency, such as:

- Avoiding any implication in food or fundraising appeals that food banks can end hunger.
- Refusing any form of government or council funding where it must be spent on food.
- Creating a corporate donations policy that rejects funding from companies whose practices conflict with your aims, such as those that fail to pay the Real Living Wage or where the primary aim of the donation is to improve the company's reputation.
- Not accepting food from bulk-purchasing schemes, outsourced donation platforms or from mass corporate donations.
- Avoiding investment in infrastructure that expands the capacity for emergency food provision, including shared infrastructure where this is the stated aim.


Document what your boundary looks like in practice and create a simple decision-tree to support staff in handling the day-to-day decisions they need to make.

Agree how you will approach existing sources of food

As food banking has developed in the UK, so has our understanding of the challenges it presents. Looking back, some food sources or past decisions may now feel out of step with the principles we hold today. Some may be difficult to reverse, like long-standing corporate partnerships. Others, such as a recent shift to collective purchasing, might be easier to step away from. You don't need to revisit everything at once. What matters most is setting a clear direction for the future, while staying open to returning to past decisions when you feel ready.

Convene people with lived experience and partners to agree how to navigate limits

This decision about existing food sources, and the extent to which you are already struggling with stock, will shape how soon you need to define a limit to your support as these boundaries come into place. That limit will mean some people who need and seek support may not be able to access it. We should plan for this in advance, bringing together people with lived experience and partners, both nationally and in our communities, to help navigate this limit with care. We must focus on minimising harm, protecting dignity, connecting people to alternative support, and resisting any drift towards ideas of deservedness. Agree how to keep communications clear too, so the focus stays on government action rather than more food donations.


If people feel uncomfortable talking about limits, it can help to map the ones you already have together. You might close at weekends, have a geographical boundary, or a voucher limit.

Identify and take steps to avoid creeping forms of growth

Growth can be driven by wider trends too

Even with clear boundaries around how much food we distribute and where it comes from, growth can still emerge in subtle ways. It may build gradually through external pressure, shifting expectations or changes in how our organisations operate. We need to stay alert to these risks.

Be cautious of fresh food infrastructure

There is an important debate around the link between emergency food and health. In North America, many food banks have responded by expanding their capacity to handle fresh food. As Janet Poppendieck reflects, whilst this is understandable, the walk-in fridges and cold-chain infrastructure required have also intensified the process of institutionalisation. The best way to improve access to fresh food is to put money in people's pockets, which only government can do at scale. Where we offer support in the meantime, we should find ways to improve access without expanding our footprint. Many food banks already do this by redirecting food purchasing budgets into shopping vouchers, so people can buy the fresh food they want.

Don't become part of the climate crisis response

The week I spoke with the team at Food Banks Canada, a food bank had burnt down in a forest fire. When I visited Feeding America, it was days after a food bank had been destroyed by Hurricane Helene. In both countries, food banks have been affected by climate disasters and have taken on major roles in the aftermath, stepping in where government fails to invest. The pattern is familiar: the crisis feels exceptional, food banks respond, government grows reliant, prepares less, and the cycle repeats itself. As climate emergencies become more frequent in the UK, we need a clear position. If we are here temporarily, we cannot become part of the long-term response. Our role should be to speak up for those we support, who will be disproportionately affected if government doesn't properly invest in a statutory response.

Advocate for your local authority to have clear plans for ensuring access to food during large-scale disruptions and emergencies, such as climate events, which do not rely on your services.

Be aware of the risks when your organisation grows

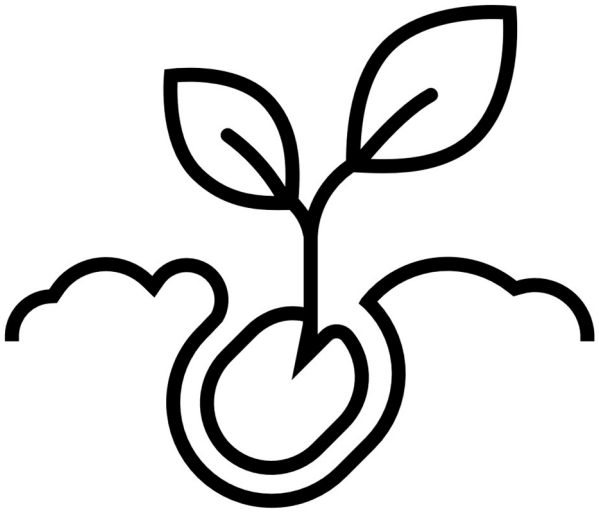
As your focus shifts, your wider organisation may still grow. You might, for example, bring in a staff member to lead organising work or expand outreach to offer advice and support to more people before they reach crisis. This isn't inherently a problem, but we need to make sure it doesn't unintentionally increase our capacity to provide food. The risk is clearest when growth in other services leads to the organisation moving into a larger space. Many food banks are opening community hubs, for example, and it's easy to see how these buildings might quietly expand storage and distribution capacity, with an unspoken pressure to fill those spaces.

Even if you avoid this, challenging the perception is important too. This is why some food banks have restructured and rebranded, positioning emergency food as one part of a wider set of activities, rather than their defining identity. When I met Nick Saul, who led The Stop's shift from food bank to Community Food Centre, he described how they buried emergency food within a broader offer of participatory, agency-focused programmes. Emergency food remained – improved in quality, cultural diversity and ease of access – but it was less present in their programming and storytelling. This meant that when they opened new spaces, they could celebrate them fully and talk about food in relation to health, community, joy and justice.

3

Focus on helping to bring about structural change

The political moment we find ourselves in, and the narrow window for change under a government who have committed to change, means we must urgently give equal weight to strategic sustainability and invest more deeply in work that drives structural change. This section explores how. It outlines ways we can adapt our wider work towards that goal, make use of our influence, and build power alongside those connected to our food banks.



Put structural change at the centre

Respond to the urgency of this opportunity

Across the UK, many food banks have already turned their focus to the role they can play in driving structural change, and the lasting reforms needed to end the need for food banks. They are sharing data and stories to highlight need and are calling on government to act. At the recent cross-sector *Guarantee Our Essentials* lobby day, food banks turned up in force. This progress deserves recognition, but the window for meaningful change is closing, and we need to go even further. Every food bank must now treat structural change as an urgent priority in the remaining years of this government. It should be central to how we understand our role, with time and funding invested accordingly, and the rest of our work aligned to support it.

Ringfence resource for structural change

That begins with concrete steps to protect resource for this work. You might set aside a proportion of your unrestricted income, fundraise for a specific role focused on structural change, such as a campaigns manager, or allocate a set amount of staff time. Consider how much space you give this work in your communications too, including on social media.

If structural change work is new to your organisation, and you don't have any dedicated staff, start by setting aside an afternoon a week for some of the activities described on the next page.

Be radically honest about our limits

It also means being direct and honest about what emergency food can and can't do when talking to the public. We can name it as a lifeline, while being clear about how short-lived the relief is, and how few people we reach. We need to tackle public misconceptions head-on, helping people understand that food banks are a sticking plaster, not a solution.

Avoid using slogans or messaging that suggest someone's donation, or the support we provide, can end hunger.

Help people believe in change

While it's important to keep highlighting the hunger and hardship we see, we also need to build a wider story into our communications and conversations so people understand the broader change we're working towards. That begins by telling our history, so people see that our existence is political, not inevitable. In the US, MAZON's Hunger Museum shows how our story could be told at scale, offering a model we could adapt here. We also need to offer a hopeful vision for the future, one that frames social security not just as something to defend, but as part of the society we want, rooted in dignity, fairness and shared responsibility.

Align your fundraising communications

Telling our history and the story of change we are part of must also shape how we speak to donors. While this may lose some support, it can attract others more aligned with our direction. At Oregon Food Bank, the root causes of poverty and their work on structural change are central to fundraising communications. Their data shows that although some donors opt out, they are attracting others who stay engaged for much longer. These donors say they want to back long-term solutions and feel energised by the progress they can see.

Write down the story you want to tell, including your key messages, and use it to guide all communications, including anything you use to attract donations.

Wielding your power

Our potential to create change

With a focus on structural change, our collective potential is immense. We carry expertise, rooted in daily conversations with people facing poverty and backed by data gathered across the country. We've earned legitimacy through the care we've shown in our communities, built reach through vast networks of volunteers, supporters and donors, and have developed public platforms that can now amplify a different message.

Getting started

If you're new to this work, it can feel overwhelming or a bit abstract, but you don't need a policy team or a big budget to make an impact, and you don't have to change everything at once. It can help to think about the immediate changes that would help those you support.

At Neighbors Together, a small pantry in Brooklyn, staff noticed more community members facing illegal evictions by corporate landlords. They listened to people's stories, gathered evidence, and named the landlords publicly. Together with those affected, they then turned up outside the landlords' offices in protest. The landlords backed down, the story hit the news, and the issue reached the City Council. In Toronto, North York Harvest Food Bank recently spent months collecting petition signatures and sending letters, and then organised a rally made up of community members and local food banks. They helped secure a transport fare freeze, more funding for renter support and an expansion to the student nutrition programme. Each win had a direct impact on the lives of those they support and showed policy change was possible.

Start by identifying a local issue that affects those you support. Talk to people who come to the food bank, and to staff, volunteers and partners about what they're seeing and hearing.

Our power as a role model

We also hold power in how we operate. Paying staff fairly, offering stable work, and upholding rights sends a clear message about the kind of employment we expect from others, even if we don't want our organisations to exist long-term. At Greater Cleveland Food Bank, alongside a strategic shift, they focused on becoming an employer people want to work for and shared that journey to influence others. We can also model the kind of collaboration and leadership needed for wider change. During the campaign for the Canadian Disability Benefit, Daily Bread funded materials and resources but stayed in the background, giving others the platform. This built trust and showed how a shared mission could come first.

Confront corporate practices that drive poverty

As we've explored, one of the unintended impacts of corporate donations is that we may feel restricted to speak out about the role low pay, insecure work and exploitative business practices play in driving poverty. Taking a values-led approach to donations and only accepting donations from those who align with our aims is an important first step to countering this, but we can also go further by speaking out when we see harm. As Neighbors Together showed above, we can speak up and challenge powerful interests. We can align ourselves with existing campaigns calling for better work, such as the Real Living Wage campaign, and stand alongside trade unions and local organisers already focused on these issues. As we see an increasing focus from the government on employability, we need to make sure attention isn't lost on ensuring that work is secure and that it pays enough for people to live on.

Building power

Support others to take action

As well as using the influence we already hold, we can build power too. We can support others to see the role they could play in helping end the need for food banks and equip them to act. We can also bring together those we're connected to, turning shared concern into a stronger voice.

Equip your volunteers to become a political force

Tens of thousands of people volunteer their time to support food banks. If we can involve them in advocacy, we unlock a vast resource. That starts with making the invitation clear. Some food banks have created dedicated advocacy roles. Others, like the Greater Chicago Food Depository, use their corporate volunteering induction to offer simple steps, such as contacting an elected representative, so people leave knowing how they can help beyond the warehouse.

Make space for people who have experience of poverty to lead

The people we support are, by virtue of their lived experience, experts in what causes poverty, how it affects people and what changes are needed to end it. They have a powerful voice that we can help amplify. At Daily Bread, this principle leads them to train a cohort of people who have used the food bank as peer researchers for their Annual Report.

We should also create opportunities for people to speak directly to those in power, rather than speaking on their behalf. This takes care and thought. Advocacy can be daunting, and people may need support to take part with confidence. At Greater Cleveland Food Bank, they've developed a training programme with classes on storytelling, public speaking and policymaking. The team describe a mutual benefit: the food bank gains a pool of compelling advocates, while participants build skills they can carry into other parts of life.

We can also shift power by stepping back, giving up control and creating real opportunities for leadership among those we support. Oregon Food Bank have done this by forming a Policy Leadership Council, made up of people with lived experience, which now serves as the decision-making body for the food bank's policy agenda.

Through this work, we build power not just in individuals, but in the communities they form. In Cleveland and Oregon, the people I met involved in this advocacy work all spoke about the strength and mutual support they found in their relationships with other advocates.

If you're not sure how to involve the people you support in advocacy, ask them. Don't assume who will want to take part. Bring it up in conversation or put up a simple poster to invite interest.

Bring your partners together to speak with one voice

As a meeting point for many issues, we're also connected to a wide range of partners. If we intentionally bring those partners together for advocacy, we can create a unified and amplified voice for change. Greater Cleveland Food Bank gave a simple example of this when they attended a meeting with an elected representative and invited fifteen partner organisations. The politician took note and went on to champion their cause. In Vancouver, community-based organisations have come together through the Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks. The collective has one staff member, yet other organisations in the city reflected on the strength of its shared voice, even compared to larger, better-resourced groups. They noted the legitimacy of a voice made up of many organisations directly connected to the communities they serve.

OREGON FOOD BANK – OREGON – UNITED STATES

Credit: Oregon Foodbank

Where do we go from here?

This report has tried to capture what I learned during the two months I spent with food bankers in the US and Canada last year. I saw a food banking system treated as permanent, operating on an overwhelming scale. That experience shaped the core arguments about food banking that I have presented: that food banks are political; that we don't reach everyone; that we cannot solve the problem; and that, in the long term, our presence risks undermining the solution.

In the report, I have reflected on how community donations have failed to keep pace with rising need in the UK. I've highlighted the rapid growth of corporate partnerships and mass donations. I've described the emergence of collective buying schemes and the push to scale operations for efficiency. I've noted the millions food banks are now spending on food, and the fundraising infrastructure being built to sustain it. I've shared my anxiety that these may be early signs of a drift into a new era of food banking that brings us closer to the model in North America.

This report hasn't sought to assign blame, and I've deliberately avoided specific examples in the UK. I understand why much of the growth we've seen has happened: food bankers are making impossible choices, where decisions can feel like the difference between someone eating or not. While I recognise the weight of that responsibility, I've argued that we need to step back and recognise that our impact is more complex, and that we also need to consider how our actions shape wider society and affect those who may need support in future too.

In response, I've proposed a decision-making framework that considers our impact more holistically. It centres on holding operational, social and strategic sustainability in balance. This means weighing the call to meet immediate need against the risks of further growth, and making sure the support we provide today doesn't come at the expense of the time, money and focus we need for work focused on structural, long-term and lasting change.

I have argued that the only way to hold these priorities in balance is to establish a boundary to our overall growth, step back from sources of food and efficiency that cause additional harm, and invest more in structural change. I have set out the foundational steps I believe food bank leaders can take to support this shift: preparing their organisations for change, defining boundaries in practice, and expanding their structural change work.

In writing this report, I've grappled with some difficult feelings. I am finishing it filled with hope. The history of food banking shows that nothing is inevitable. Food banks exist because of political decisions, and we can use our collective strength – which in just two decades spread an idea to every corner of the UK – to help shape the decisions that come next. Food banks are not abstract concepts. They are communities of people who care deeply, turn up when no one else does, and whose tenacity makes anything feel possible. As I was writing, I watched with dismay as Labour proposed cuts to disability benefits, and then with encouragement for what might be possible as food bankers stood up, spoke out and helped change the course.

Whilst I am concerned about recent developments in food banking, I believe that, as we continue coming together, we will find a way to navigate this period of change that stays true to our vision and values. I hope this report offers a useful contribution to that conversation, while recognising all it does not do, and the big questions it raises about what this shift would mean in practice. These are questions we now need to explore together.

If you have time, please follow the link to complete a short survey and share your reflections. If you'd like to discuss anything or would like me to present the findings, please get in touch.

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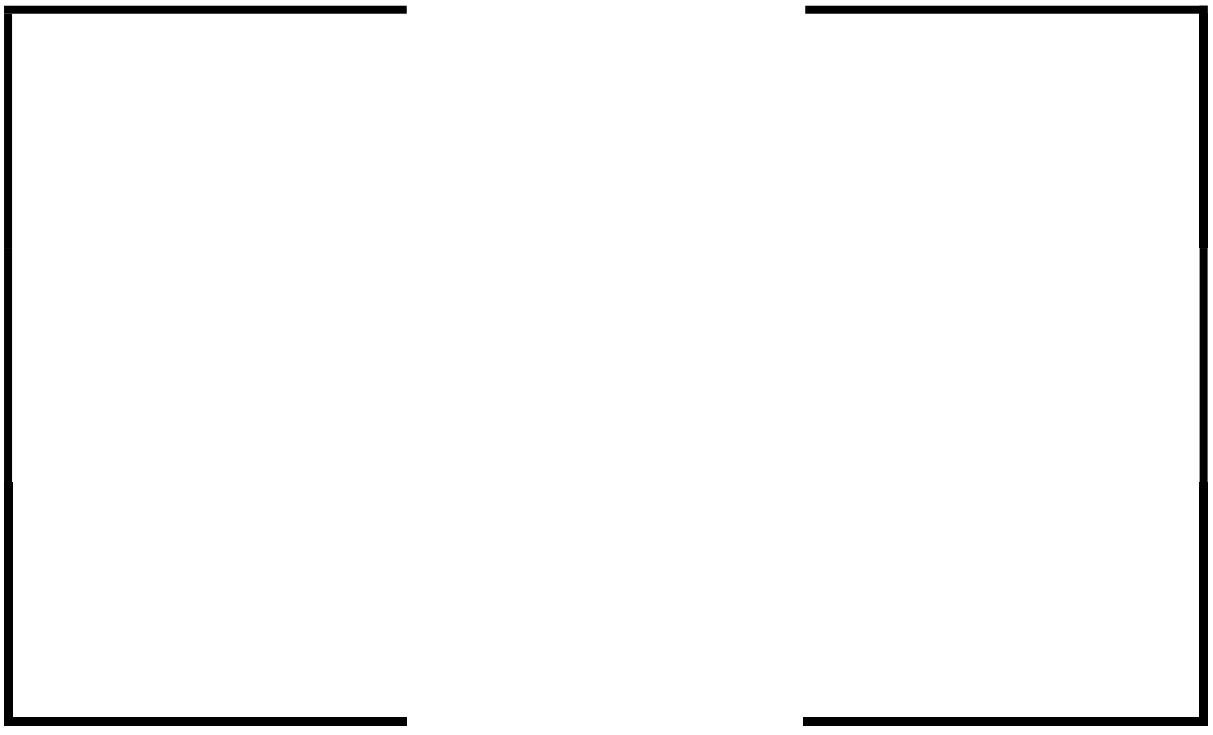
About me, acknowledgments and bibliography



About me

Alongside my colleague Kate, I currently lead the Pathfinder programme at Trussell, a learning and innovation programme exploring the role food banks can play in helping to end the need for their services. Before this, I worked in a range of community development roles. Most recently, I led a series of community programmes in Orkney. Uncomfortable with the food initiatives we were setting up, I facilitated the development of, and secured funding for, a multi-sector partnership that introduced an advice and cash-first approach to support across the islands. I'm most content when helping a group make sense of big problems, with an even bigger stack of post-it notes.

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The title of this report was inspired by *The Geographies of Food Banks in the Meantime* by Paul Cloke, Jon May and Andrew Williams. Their work captures the tensions and contradictions of food banking, and I'm grateful for the language the paper gave me.

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Congressional Hunger Centre	Greater Cleveland Food Bank	Robin Hood Foundation
Daily Bread Food Bank	Greater Vancouver Food Bank	South Vancouver Food Hub
DC Central Kitchen	Hunger Free America	The Stop
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