

Users of Food banks/providers in Northumberland Nov 2020 – April 2021

Report of Northumberland VCS Assembly Food Network - Sept 2021

Introduction

Northumberland VCS Assembly Food Network decided to collect data on users of food banks/food providers to gain a better understanding of demand across the county and the situations faced by users to raise awareness of need across Northumberland.

After an exercise to find out what data food banks/food providers had available on their users, it was evident that the only consistent data across the majority of organisations were the numbers of users, adults and children.

The amount of data collected varied for example one food banks collected detailed information on the age group of beneficiaries, adults and children, types of benefit received, employment situation, current circumstances and health situation another just recorded recipients age groups and whether receiving benefits.

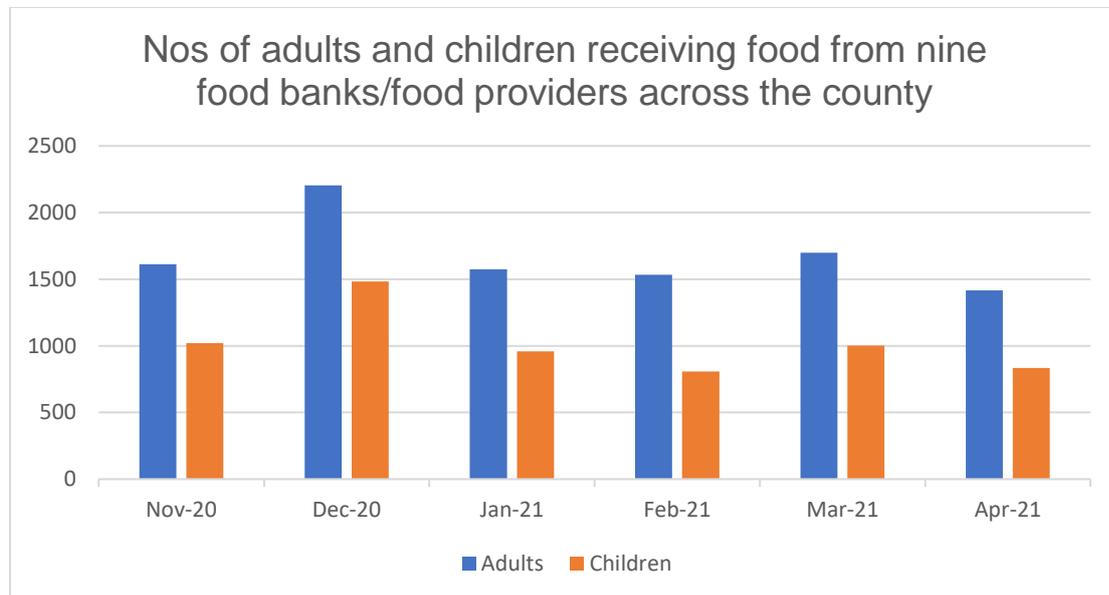
Data on users of food banks/providers

The following table details the number of recipients of food from nine food bank/providers across Northumberland. This is not a full picture of demand across the county because we are aware of at least three other providers across the county for which data was not provided.

One food bank only collects details of the number of parcels they give out rather than recording individual users and another food provider had only just begun collecting data on users. The latter has had over 250 users a month between March and June 2021 with a peak of 310 in March. The data does however provide an indication of the pattern of demand on the nine food banks/providers.

The table below illustrates the consistent demand for food over the period November 2020 to April 2021 with the expected increase in demand in December over the Christmas period. The numbers relate to the total numbers of users, not unique users. Data presented here is just a snapshot over six months and whilst there is no overall evidence of increase in

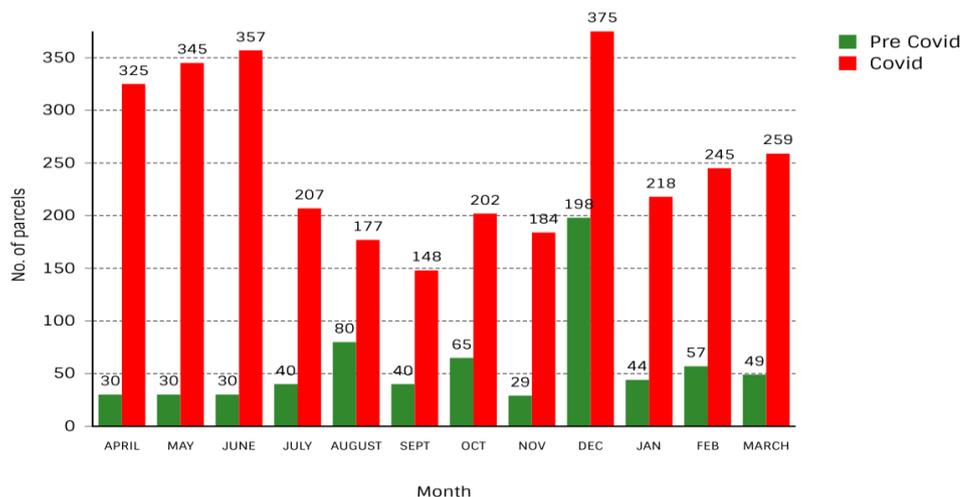
demand it indicates the steady demand for food aid across these nine providers. Collecting data over a longer period will provide a better indication of the pattern of demand.



For information, also included is the number of parcels provided by a food bank over a year as this is the data they collect. The significant increase in demand during COVID-19 is evident particularly April – June 2020 and during December 2020 and whilst fairly consistent the rest of the year, shows some evidence of increase Jan- March 2021.

ADFB COVID COMPARISON

April 2020- March 2021



What do we know about current use of Food Banks/ food providers

Food providers indicate that users of their service vary and that there is not a consistent

pattern of users. Some reported increasing numbers of elderly people and people in work using their services, whilst another has experienced an increase in asylum seekers using their service.

'We have had a considerable increase in asylum seekers users. We know that some of our regulars have now returned to work and no longer attend, so the people attending are not the same each week. Many people that lost their jobs due to the pandemic expressed being embarrassed having to come to use the food bank. Equally having to wait 6 weeks for universal credit to kick in. Many vulnerable adults coming through due to mental health, alcohol and drug dependency. Verbal feedback suggests that the 'larder' approach where people can pick what they want and will use, reduces waste of unwanted items.'

A food bank was keen to make clear that they have no evidence of this notion of dependency and what they do see is households relying on their support to supplement their household budget through food aid allowing them to free up finances to for instance pay debt, rent arrears.

"I am so grateful for all the help you provide for me and my family. I wouldn't be able to pay off my debt or my rent arrears if you didn't help us and I just wanted to say thank you!"

"Don't know what I would do without my parcels from the food bank. I would struggle and be in more debt"

Case studies

The following case studies illustrate the importance of food banks in providing support to residents in need.

Case Study 1

Alice hasn't worked for several years due to physical and mental health problems. Her two adult children also struggle with severe anxiety, which means their attempts to live independently can be short-lived and erratic before they come back to live with Alice. The regular changes in occupancy mean that Alice's benefit income can vary quite a lot, making it difficult to plan and budget.

"I don't know what I'd do without West Northumberland Food Bank. It's not just the food don't get me wrong, the food's amazing! but just knowing that there's someone there to listen and help out makes me feel like I don't need to worry all the time. I always feel cared for and the people on the phone always listen without judging me.

Case Study 2

Sarah *"I never thought that I would ever use a food bank, but I had separated from my long term partner and had no income except Child Tax Credits and Child Benefit. I'd never claimed benefits before, but the staff explained the system to me so I could understand the benefits I was entitled to. I have had a congenital physical disability since birth, so the support worker asked if I was in receipt of either DLA or PIP. I had never heard of either. She helped me apply for PIP and when I went for my assessment, the assessor said that I should have been getting help all my life. I was awarded higher rate on both daily living and mobility and this has changed our lives. At Christmas, the food bank had wrapped some presents for my children and me. I was overwhelmed that someone had thought about us."*

More than just a place to get food

The case studies illustrate that the support provided at some food banks goes beyond just providing food but providing support, assistance and signposting to help users maximise their incomes and thereby hopefully reduce their need for food aid. Food Banks would prefer to be out of business and as such look for ways to assist clients with the support they need and signpost to reduce reliance and help tackle the root causes of people's difficulties.

A food bank informed of their volunteer helpline team with an average of 80 calls a week with 4 new households coming forward each week. Every caller is provided with signposting, referral and/or advocacy and above all listened to.

"just knowing that there's someone there to listen and help out makes me feel like I don't need to worry all the time. I always feel cared for and the people on the phone always listen without judging me."

. "I didn't know what to do when the washing machine blew up, but when I mentioned it on the phone to the food bank, they suggested straight away that they could put in a grant application. so I'm really grateful for the knowledge of the food bank volunteers and staff."

Essential and valued support in the community

Whilst we would all agree that we would prefer that foodbanks did not exist and that there was adequate financial support to enable people to live their lives without resorting to using food banks, it has become a fact of life that they are a much needed essential support for families and individuals who value the help and support they receive.

'We feel quite overwhelmed by such kind generosity, so much more than we could have hoped for. I never knew that the kindness and help was actually out there, and believe me, it makes me feel so much less alone with fears and worries. Even if, hopefully, we only need help for just a very short while, it has opened my eyes and gives a feeling of a safety net, available if needed.'

'I just wanted to say thank you so much for my bags on Tuesday. You guys are absolutely brilliant. No one's mentioned food bank workers who've been working 5-7 days a week, no one's mentioned them at all. I guess if they do it'll highlight poverty in this country which would ruffle feathers, without doubt. I think that you guys most definitely deserve national recognition. Thank you again.'

'Today a lovely couple arrived to deliver some wonderful supplies to us, so generously giving their time and transport to help. The lady was so kind and nice, and spent several minutes talking to me when I know how busy they must have been. Those few words meant a lot as currently I don't get a chance to speak to anyone for days, even weeks at a time - so, much appreciated - even if it is mainly talking about 'problems', it's still good just to speak the words to another human!'

Moving forward

Food Banks will remain an essential means of support for many people struggling because of inadequate income. The expansion of food banks was greatly encouraged by government

policy, social security cuts were not the only driver but unreliable and insecure contracts led to working poverty. The underlying problem is that people's incomes aren't enough to cover the cost of living. Many food banks are doing more than just providing food and ensuring that support is provided to maximise individuals and families income. However to move to a situation where food banks are no longer required needs a commitment from central government and support for local government to make changes to national and local policy and practice. The duty to address food insecurity should be placed squarely with the government and not on local community and charities.