

Interview: Adrian Curtis

Moussa Haddad: Can you tell me a little bit about the model of the Trussell Trust? What's the philosophy sitting behind the work you do?

Adrian Curtis: The Trussell Trust operates a number of projects. We started helping Roma children in Bulgaria who were orphans, by creating housing and opportunities to help them break the cycle of poverty and learn essential life skills. And while fundraising for that in Salisbury, we were contacted by a member of the public, who said: 'What you're doing is fantastic, but, you know, how can you help me, because all I've got is half a loaf of bread and a pot of jam and I've got to feed my children tonight.' And that sent our trustees on a journey. We quickly realised that, unfortunately, that lady's position wasn't unique, and that many people, even in a wealthy city like Salisbury, found themselves from time to time in a short-term crisis, when they needed some support and some food aid, because they weren't eating. So – to cut a very long story short – we established our first food bank in Salisbury. We collected tinned and dried food from members of the public, from charities, churches, and helped people.

From that, we partnered with a range of organisations in Salisbury. These held emergency food vouchers, which they gave to people in crisis and referred them to the food bank, where we supplied three days' emergency tinned and dried food that local people had donated. We obviously quickly realised that the project was meeting a really tangible need, and if the need was in Salisbury, then there was a need in every town in the UK. So we embarked upon a vision to help empower communities to be able to offer emergency food for local people in crisis in their communities too – people who would have gone hungry if their projects didn't exist.

So that exciting journey began in 2004 and the vehicle we decided to use – the model we decided to use to achieve that – was a social franchise model, involving local charities and churches working together to develop a food bank project. We could help them with a consistent operating model, so all our food banks use a consistent model and consistent branding, and we could use our scale to work with corporate partners and acquire things slightly

Last year, a shocking 913,000 people were referred to a Trussell Trust food bank for emergency food.

In the latest of our series of interviews, Adrian Curtis, the Network Director of the UK's largest food bank provider, talks to CPAG's Moussa Haddad.

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more efficiently and effectively than what those projects could do on their own. And we collected the data on who we were feeding and why those people came to the food bank, so that we could report on the picture across the country. And that's how our food bank network developed.

So, to answer your question – sorry, it's a bit of a long answer – our ethos is very much about offering a practical solution to a problem that we see – just as we did when we noticed issues in Bulgaria – and enabling communities throughout the UK to be able to offer solutions to the crises that many people find themselves in. And, in the background, telling people's stories, so that policymakers and others can understand the need that exists and tackle the root causes of that need – that's very much our ethos and what we're about.

MH: You talk a bit about the data you collect. I'd be interested in your view on what the increased use of food banks tells us, and also, what are the limitations to what it can tell us?

AC: Well, it's been very interesting. It's been a really amazing journey. Having launched that food bank network in 2004, we quickly began to develop more projects and currently have just over 420 projects across the UK that run around 1,400 food bank centres. Last year we fed around 913,000 people who were referred to us

in crisis, which was 163 per cent more than in the previous year. So we have seen a huge increase, not only in the number of food bank projects that have opened, but also a disproportionate increase in the number of clients who have been referred to us for emergency food aid.

So the volume of people has really surprised us and there has been a dramatic increase over the past two years in referrals, disproportionate to the number of food banks that have opened. And what we can tell from the data we receive – there are limitations around that data, but we have a tick box on the vouchers which we give to our referral partners and we can measure the percentage of referrals we receive due to various forms of crises – and what we’ve seen is a significant increase in the proportion of clients who have been referred to us with welfare-related issues. So that would be either a delay in their welfare claim being processed or a sudden change in the level of welfare payment being received, which obviously includes where that payment has been stopped, in the form of a sanction or something similar.

And I think, from looking at that data and from working with food banks across the UK, we’ve also seen a significant rise in the cost of food, in the cost of living, fuel costs, while salaries have tended to stagnate or, in some cases, fall, and for many people this has put a tremendous strain on their disposable income. And then they are less resilient to any crisis that may occur. They no longer have the financial breathing space to be able to get through that crisis, and they’re usually faced with a choice between paying the bill and putting food on the table. That’s become the reality for more and more people, as that disposable income is squeezed. But also, the way that changes to welfare have been implemented has caused an increase in the proportion of our clients who are experiencing welfare-related issues.

MH: Talking about social security issues, I’m interested in whether the data that Trussell currently collects allows you to get an accurate picture of the link between increasing food bank use and social security benefits?

AC: What the data shows us is what the organisations who are referring to us tell us is the reason behind the crisis. That’s telling us that around half those referred to food banks experience a problem with the welfare system. But more in-depth research has been done in food banks, with yourselves, with Oxfam and with other partners, that is able to draw some deep-

er conclusions, and look specifically at certain policy issues, which, of course, may affect a proportion of our clients. And we are planning to develop and enhance our data system in the future to capture a deeper level of detail of some of our clients, as we embark on enabling our food banks to offer more than food to those in crisis. That includes putting welfare, debt and financial support and advisers within the food bank centres themselves. So we are progressing with that project over the next year, and that eventually will lead to enhanced data systems so that we can support those clients a little bit more in depth.

MH: How do you see the balance between the emergency use model that you started with and the systematic service that provides this ongoing support? Do you see that as a fixed balance or something that’s changing?

AC: The way we see it is that food banks are there to address a need, which is a need for immediate, emergency food assistance, whilst our partner organisations who refer to our food banks deal with whatever is underlying or causing that crisis for that individual or for that family. In our food bank centres, historically we’ve offered signposting and support in a kind of café-style environment, to enable the clients who have been referred to us access the support they need. But we would like to enhance that relationship with those organisations we signpost to and who refer clients to us, so that we can bring some debt and welfare advisers into our food bank centres. So, whilst the client is receiving their emergency food, rather than just signposting them to an external organisation, someone from that organisation can sit with them at their point of need and begin to start the process of addressing some of the causes of their crisis, which could include more longer term issues.

MH: How do you get this understanding of the drivers of food bank use into the policy process?

AC: That’s a very good question. We work with a number of key partners across the UK that provide more in-depth policy recommendations. We work with yourselves, we work with Oxfam and a number of other partners. We recently gave evidence to the APPG [All Party Parliamentary Group] inquiry into hunger and food poverty. And we are there to tell the client’s story, to begin to explain the crisis that exists, and to highlight the issues around hunger in the UK. We very much hope that that engages with

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policymakers, to make them develop policies that work better for people who experience poverty and who experience short-term crises, and also help make the welfare system work more efficiently for those who need to rely on it. So we're happy to show anyone round a food bank. We're happy to talk to policymakers and to our partner organisations to help us achieve that.

MH: I've seen comments from your Chair, Chris Mould, on problems getting access to the DWP, getting meetings with the DWP. Has that made it harder to engage with the policy process?

AC: We're always happy to talk to policymakers and people of all political backgrounds. We're an apolitical charity. And the issue, unfortunately, of people who are in short-term crisis, is one that has been around, to put it in perspective, since we started the food bank network in 2004. But it does concern us when we see, for example, the number of clients needing to use our services because of a problem with the welfare system – either a delay in those welfare claims being processed, or a sudden change to the level of payments people receive – and that's something we're always keen to talk to people about, and to policymakers so that they can help develop that system and make it work more efficiently for those who need to use it.

MH: What does the Trussell Trust see as some of the solutions to these kind of problems?

AC: Firstly, we recognise that there will always be people who fall through a safety net, and who will have a short-term crisis, and I'm sure that if you were to eliminate the need for food banks, you would need to eliminate all the reasons why people are referred to us. But as far as lengthy delays to claims being processed – some of our clients report having to wait several months for a payment to be received – those kinds of issues concern us, and can be rectified by changes to the way claims are processed. But also, the implementation of some of the changes to the welfare system has clearly resulted in some people finding themselves in a short-term crisis, and those are areas we would encourage policymakers to look at very closely.

MH: You talk about support in a crisis, and obviously we've seen quite a lot of changes to crisis support that the state provides over the past few years – in particular, the move from the social fund to more local welfare assistance. Do you see a relationship between those kinds of changes to emergency support from the state and rising food bank use?

AC: Yes, we would actually, absolutely. The devolution of the social fund, for example, has created various issues in communities where we have food banks. We've had, for example, calls to our office in Salisbury, even, from individuals with no money, or a problem with their electricity or something, who have been told they should ring the Trussell Trust – they can help. So, clearly there's been an issue at a local level with how the assistance schemes have been communicated to people, and how they can help them. And I believe that has contributed to the increase in those who have been referred to us because they are in a crisis.

MH: Does that vary from locality to locality?

AC: It varies greatly from area to area. Some of our areas report a very good relationship with local assistance schemes, where they have a very good referral relationship and that's working very efficiently, and where the local authorities are supporting the clients with that assistance – and where they aren't, or where a person isn't eligible but is still in a crisis and the food bank can support them. So those relationships are very distinct and work really, really well and effectively. Whereas in other communities, there is very poor communication: people are not aware of what's available to them, and how they can access those services.

MH: Your statistics show that 330,205 children received emergency assistance from your organisation in the last financial year [1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014], more than a third of the total number [913,138] of people receiving emergency assistance. What is Trussell Trust's view on that?

AC: Our vouchers list the number of children and the number of adults in a household, and that's where that figure comes from. We wouldn't therefore necessarily just be supporting children on their own, because usually they would be with an adult in a household or family. But it does concern us when we hear statistics like one in five mums in the UK admit to skipping meals to be able to put food on the table for their children. As an example of how this is affecting food bank use, how children are interacting with food banks, in school holidays – in particular, summer holidays – we see a marked increase in the number of referrals. This could be because parents are having to supply that extra meal that the children would have usually had in term time for free in school, when they are eligible for free school meals, and now those families are having to stretch their budg-

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ets that little bit more to buy that extra meal, and this causes some families to enter into greater hardship through the holidays.

So what we're trying to do is work with our food banks – we partnered with Kellogg's, for example, to trial breakfast clubs in six of our food banks. And we hope to learn from that trial and help more of our food banks across the UK launch breakfast clubs and programmes to help supply meals during school holidays for families who would find that beneficial.

MH: Looking beyond the assistance you provide, what else do you feel that Trussell Trust contributes? For example, what do people who volunteer in food banks get from it? How does Trussell Trust's work help increase awareness across other parts of society of the issues that you're dealing with?

AC: The food bank network currently has around 30,000 volunteers. We operate a supported volunteer programme in Salisbury, and we have helped our food banks run similar programmes to help volunteers who may need that extra support to be able to take up opportunities within the project, learn new skills, build confidence, and meet friends and enhance their networks. There's a huge range of volunteers from all ages, from all demographics, from all walks of life, who every week volunteer their time to help our food banks support those in crisis. And those volunteers mean an awful lot to the Trussell Trust. They are at the centre of everything we do – from our social enterprise project through to our food banks. And we know that many of our clients later go on to be volunteers, wanting to give something back.

One of the activities which our food banks undertake is supermarket collections. We have a relationship with a number of supermarkets, but we have two national collection events, for example, each year with Tesco, where a number of volunteers help by giving out maybe a shopping list to shoppers, who might then donate to the project on their way out. And through that interaction, we not only help generate the food our local food banks need, but also we are telling people that there is a need in their community. We are educating people about the hidden hunger that exists in their community, and the sorts of crises that people local to them may be experiencing. It provides an opportunity for us to interact literally with millions of people each year. And just to put that into perspective, when we started the food bank network in 2004, if you were to talk to somebody about

food poverty or issues around hunger in the UK, very few people would have recognised that it existed: many people were incredibly surprised to hear that food banks were needed in their town. Whereas, now, the vast majority of people you meet will have heard about a food bank. They recognise that food poverty exists, they will even know somebody who has needed to use a food bank. And so, educating people and highlighting the very real problem that exists in communities across the UK has been something that the food bank network and the Trussell Trust has had the privilege to do, quite effectively I think, over the last ten years or so.

MH: Looking to the future, where do you think Trussell will be in ten years' time? Where would you like it to be?

AC: Where we would like to be is celebrating the fact that far fewer people are being referred to our food banks. I think that's a starting point. How we plan to help achieve that is through bringing advisers into our food bank centres to work with those who are referred to us at the point of crisis, to be able to help resolve some of the underlying reasons behind their crisis, to be able to help people with budgeting and making their lives more resilient to the various crises that may occur, and by continuing to tell the story of those who need to use our service, so that policymakers can design policies that work better for those who need to use welfare assistance, and other programmes as well. And we believe that by doing that, by providing more than just food to people who use food banks, we can have a positive impact on their lives, we can help make them more resilient to crises, and less likely to need to use food banks in the future. ■

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