

JANUARY 4, 2019

At a Crossroads in the UK: Can charity and social justice co-exist in the response to food poverty? By Alison Cohen

"In the past five years in the UK, we have seen a steep rise in the number of people seeking emergency food aid in the form of charitable provision, signalling permanence to the existence of food banks. In Canada and the USA, there is a much longer history of charitable food provision. There is an urgent need to engage with what can be learnt from the transatlantic context here in the UK, and vice versa." – Dr. Kayleigh Garthwaite from the University of Birmingham and author of *Hunger Pains: Life inside Foodbank Britain*.



Sharing experiences from across the pond at the Birmingham Conference. From L to R: Jan Poppendieck, Graham Riches, Mariana Chilton, Andy Fisher, Kayleigh Garthwaite, Elaine Power, Alison Cohen (the author)

Feeling the urgency, Dr. Garthwaite and others decided to do something to shift the tides by organizing a conference in Birmingham, England called Charitable food provision as an emergency response: sharing evidence from Canada, the USA and the UK, sponsored by the British Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences. She reached out to me and other allied speakers from the United States including Professor [Jan Poppendieck](#), author of *Sweet Charity* and WhyHunger board member; Andy Fisher, author of *Big Hunger*; and Marianna Chilton, founder of [Witnesses to Hunger](#) to help bring perspective from across the pond. Together we discussed the history of food banking in the U.S., the factors that have led to the proliferation and institutionalization of food access organizations in the non-profit sector, and the emerging critique of our efficient, well-funded and seemingly permanent food banking system and the promise of alternative solutions. In short, we were invited to spin a cautionary tale for the academics, food bank workers, volunteers and funders as they try to find ways to reverse the rapid growth of emergency food aid provision since the onset of austerity measures, or welfare reform, beginning with the opening of the very first food banks in the early 2000's.

The event in Birmingham brought together 45 people from academia, charities and third sector (or non-profit) organizations, people with lived experience of hunger and poverty,

activists, and grassroots organizations. After two days of presentations, case studies, and dialogue, a strong evidence-based narrative emerged that the precipitous rise in food bank use and the emergency food aid sector in general in the UK is, not unlike the situation in the U.S., a direct result of an ever-weakening welfare state where people are undermined by policies and structural forces in their efforts to provide for their families. Over the last decade, austerity measures, coupled with a neo-liberal policy agenda at the national level, have frayed the formerly robust social welfare net leaving millions of UK residents, including over 4 million children, living in poverty. The rapid growth of the emergency food aid sector over the last decade in the UK is only less concerning than the speed with which food banks and the third sector have become socially acceptable in the eyes of the public as a way of dealing with “food poverty,” defined as the inability to afford enough nutritious food.

“We want to make sure everyone referred to a [Trussell Trust] Foodbank gets the best possible support, but at the same time we’re dedicated to bringing about long-term change so that help isn’t needed in the future.” This [comment](#) from Garry Lemon, *Director of Policy, External Affairs & Research of Trussell Trust*, a network of over 1200 Foodbanks across the UK that provide a minimum of three days’ emergency food and support to people in crisis, is indicative of the crossroads that the UK third sector is facing as the incidence of hunger and food security escalates. The question we wrestled with throughout the 2-day conference centred on the contradictions inherent in the moral imperative to respond to the immediate needs of those left to struggle with hunger and poverty while advocating that the central government step up as duty bearers in ensuring that the right to food, housing and a dignified life is fulfilled. Can food and other services be gathered and distributed by the third sector with dignity and efficiency without building permanent institutions that begin to take the place of what should be the role of government in a democratic and peaceful society? Can the provision of charity and the fight for social justice co-exist? All the while, the UK government is attempting to overhaul the benefits system (i.e. currently in the form of the program called [Universal Credit](#)) while continuing to defend the need for austerity measures. It would appear that food poverty and the present-day response – charitable food aid provision — is the new reality for millions of UK families. The Trussell Trust, among charitable food provision organizations in the UK, most closely resembles its counterpart in the U.S. [Feeding America](#) – also a network of food banks and considered to be the largest anti-hunger organization in the U.S. (A note on semantics: The UK uses food banks to refer to what we in the states call food pantries. In the U.S. food

banks are typically large state- or region-wide institutions that acquire and store food in their warehouses for distribution to food pantries.) The Trussell Trust builds and supports a network of food banks throughout the UK in acquiring and distributing food based on ["referral vouchers for food"](#) provided by professionals working in local public social services, such as healthcare workers, public school officials and social workers. The Trussell Trust also supports food banks in going beyond food provision to help individuals find the resources they need to address other underlying root causes of their crisis.

Unlike Feeding America, Trussell Trust has recently become more vociferous about their belief that food banks are not the answer to ending hunger. As stated by Mr. Lemon during the Birmingham conference: "Trussell Trust's position is to end poverty. We should not need a charitable safety net." And yet hunger is on the rise in the UK and its roots, which lie in a deepening crisis of poverty, has been laid bare for the rest of the world in the recent incriminating [report](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Professor Philip Alston. More than 14 million people – one-fifth of the population of the world's 5th largest economy – live in poverty, according to Alston's report. "It seems patently unjust and contrary to British values that so many people are living in poverty," writes Alston. "This is obvious to anyone who opens their eyes to see the immense growth in food banks and the queues waiting outside them, the people sleeping rough in the streets, the growth of homelessness, the sense of deep despair that leads even the Government to appoint a Minister for suicide prevention and civil society to report in depth on unheard of levels of loneliness and isolation."

It would seem that executives of the Trussell Trust would not dispute Professor Alston's findings as well as his conclusion that charity is not the answer. "What I love about the Trussell Trust approach is that there is not an acceptance that we are a safety net that will always be there," said Trussell Trust's new CEO Emma Revie in an [article published by the Guardian](#). "We have to be there because the statutory safety net has too many holes in it. We will catch as many as we can, but we want to not be here." And yet, despite the CEO of Trussell Trust emphasizing publicly that they are working on an exit strategy, their most recent annual [report](#) indicates a marked increase in the number of people they are serving. Last year the Foodbank network distributed 1,332,952 three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis, a 13% increase over the previous year. Almost half a million of these went to children. This represents a higher increase than the previous year, when Foodbank use was up by 6.64%. Driving this increase, the Trust's report goes on to explain, is the growing proportion of food bank referrals due to benefit levels not covering the costs of essentials. "You get up each day trying to put yourself out of business," Ms. Revie says. And yet, as the Guardian article reports, the Trussell Trust's income and food acquisition is

growing rapidly based on its corporate partnerships with supermarkets. “Trussell’s exit strategy looks less credible following its decision earlier this year to accept £9m over three years [from the supermarket giant Asda](#),” Patrick Butler of the Guardian writes. Such a partnership is “not obviously a sign of a charity wishing to abolish itself.”

Trussell Trust does engage in “more than food” – that is, programs that aim to help food banks develop into community centers where people can come for emergency food and a range of other kinds of support such as money management, nutrition classes, and [Fuel Banks](#). These programs – all focused on helping individuals “break the cycle of poverty” – do not necessarily address the root causes of food insecurity. To that end Trussell Trust advocates for “a robust welfare safety net and secure income to make sure people can afford to eat.” So far, however, their public facing rhetoric and campaigns sound appeal to the general public and corporations to take action by donating and volunteering. Interestingly the stated mission of Trussell Trust is not to “end” hunger; rather it is to “help stop hunger.” And it requires the public’s participation and charitable contributions. “Together we can help stop hunger,” one of Trussell Trust’s ads reads. “From donating food, volunteering your time or taking on an exciting fundraising challenge, there are lots of ways to get involved with raising awareness of poverty and helping stop UK hunger.” Notably, registering one’s rage at the loss of social welfare when you go to the polls or when you talk to your local MPs does not make it on the national network’s “how you can help us stop hunger” list.

The Trussell Trust, however, is not the only game in town. I was personally introduced to more than a dozen third sector organizations in the UK addressing issues of food poverty. [The Independent Food Aid Network](#) (IFAN) represents organizations that distribute food parcels and provide emergency meals and other food aid services throughout the UK that are not affiliated with and therefore not bound to the guidelines and processes legitimized by the Trussell Trust. IFAN’s current membership is at 170, with room to grow. There are at least [801 independent food banks](#) operating across the UK (bringing the total number of food banks to over 2,000 including the Trussell Trust network) as well as a further estimated 2,000 non-food bank food aid providers. IFAN is working to bring these independent food banks and other food aid providers in association in order to create a powerful voice for advocacy challenging the underlying errant policies and broken systems. “In the long-term,” IFAN Trustee Madeleine Power said at the Birmingham conference, “the IFAN network is looking towards radical structural change.”

In response to the growing number of both Trussell Trust and some independent food banks that rely on the voucher or “referral” system to determine who they serve and for how long, IFAN is increasingly concerned about the stigmatizing nature of food banks. While the voucher system is designed to ensure that those who really need food are being served, some critics say it reinforces a moral dichotomy: the deserving and undeserving poor.

IFAN is not a parent organization that governs and directs its members’ activities. According to IFAN’s coordinator Sabine Goodwin: “IFAN network members are food aid providers that aren’t happy about the institutionalization of food aid in the UK and want to see wider systemic change so that the number of people using food aid is radically reduced.”

Politically, the trends do not suggest that the strong social safety net of yesteryears will be given new life in the UK anytime soon. In 2016 Brexit became a reality, ushering in what most political analysts say will be an era of economic precarity and social division. Will this also signal the permanence of third sector-supported food banking in the UK as a necessary means to feed those who are victims of this transformed economic and social landscape? What would it take for the UK to resist the institutionalization of food banking? With fifty years of food banking in our history, it’s true the U.S. could teach our colleagues in the UK a few lessons as they wrestle with the forces that may guide them towards larger, well-resourced, more efficient and permanent third sector food aid institutions. And yet we are still in the early stages of developing our own shared analysis of what it will take to dismantle a system that provides, as Jan Poppendieck has described, “a moral safety valve” that allows us to feel that we’re doing good for those less fortunate even while we’re not advocating for policies or systems change.

A vast majority of us in the U.S. have grown up with private charity as the normative model in addressing hunger. What started as a strategy to address a temporary crisis in the late 1960s is now, for many, a routine way of ensuring that their families get enough food and nutrition. And it provides ample opportunities for the general public to “do good and feel good.” Holiday-themed canned food drives are still prevalent in most religious institutions and schools, and corporate volunteer days to pack food or serve up lunch to our nation’s food insecure are a regular occurrence at one of the 60,000+ food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens that can be found in every state in the union. We’ve done a great job over the last 15 years or so of tweaking our food access model so that the emphasis is

increasingly on nutritious and fresh food, other social services are provided at the point of access, and that a portion of the staff engage in advocacy for SNAP improvements. At the end of the day, food banks and food pantries continue to expand and systematize with increasing funds going towards building warehouses and cold storage facilities, and procurement and distribution of food. What we've become masters at is not so much abating food insecurity as institutionalizing the corporate capture of charity. Let's not export that particular skill set! Instead let's create a dialogue with our UK colleagues about the emergent resistance to the collective legitimacy of food banking as a solution. Several new regional networks and at least one [national network](#) of food aid providers has emerged in the U.S. in the last 5 years to forge a new path and change the narrative about how to end hunger – from one that lifts up charity as the solution to one that calls for organizing, building power and grounding solutions in social justice and a rights-based framework.

Meanwhile, based on 50 years of food banking in the U.S., a few strategies that the emerging food aid sector in the UK might consider:

- Resist brick and mortar! The more infrastructure you build, the more permanent the solutions you're offering become.
- Organize volunteers and those who are living with food poverty to develop a shared analysis of the root causes of the current food poverty crisis, rooted in both a historical and contemporary context, and then advocate together for government policies and practices that ensure everyone can afford to feed their families with dignity.
- Use the right to food, a legal framework embraced by the UK government, to hold the government accountable to its obligations to rights holders – it's citizens.
- Build relationships with local government officials and advocate for systemic changes at local and regional levels.
- Hold the Trussell Trust and other growing food aid institutions accountable to developing an exit strategy and then implementing it.
- Work towards dismantling racism in our institutions and advocate for living wages.
- Take charge of the narrative about hunger and poverty. Shape and spread the narrative – through stories and campaigns — that lifts up the “true” solutions to ending hunger.

- Take the lead from those most impacted by hunger and poverty. Embrace them as core members of your campaigns and organizations. Amplify their voices so they can tell their own stories and advocate for solutions.

On the road in London: A brief encounter with three different models of food aid provision

While in the UK I had the opportunity to visit several different kinds of food charities throughout London. I was especially struck by the emphasis on dignity in how food parcels were provided to people in economic crisis and by the coordinated services offered at a single location. Based on the handful of conversations I had while the food banks were in operation, I left with the impression that volunteers and food bank managers, despite the model they were implementing, were unified in their understanding that people were in crisis because of the weakened social safety net and its ill-fitting replacement — Universal Credit. And they repeatedly emphasized that they did not want to see a rise in the number of food banks and were actively resisting activities (such as hiring staff, investing in infrastructure) that would put them on a path to permanence. At the same time, they all remarked that there has been a precipitous increase in the number of people they're serving in the recent past.

Site visit #1: [Earlsfield Food Bank](#), an independent food bank and member of IFAN, London, England



Volunteers and author at the Earlsfield Food Bank, London

Christ Church Earlsfield is an Evangelical Anglican church that has been host to an independent food bank since 2013. They began as an informal ecumenical effort pulled together by parishioners from churches representing four different denominations in the

borough of Wandsworth in London. They are now a registered charity and have 181 “regular” guests on their books. In the first 6 months of 2018, they recorded 501 guests each receiving a bag of food with a value of around £10. On a typical day when the food bank is open, they will receive about 30 people over the course of the morning.

They describe their strategy and approach as “need + service” and, as parishioner-volunteers said to me in whispered tones (they were clear about being non-partisan), food insecurity became visible in their community about the time Tony Blair was in power and after the austerity measures were put in place because of the 2008 “credit crunch.”

I was able to spend several hours in the church hall-cum-food pantry chatting with volunteers and guests. I was struck by the hospitality that was being offered by the volunteers. Everyone who walked in was greeted by a parishioner-volunteer and asked if they wanted a cup of tea or coffee and then served fruit and biscuits while they waited for their food parcel to be prepared based on a food allocation form that they filled out indicating any special requirements or diet restrictions. As more guests arrived, they greeted each other and sat around a long table conversing. About two-thirds of the guests I saw on that day were men. Most were adults, a few were accompanied by children.

The volunteers I spoke with emphasized that they were not planning on “doing this for the long haul” and that they were advocates for the government to put in place measures that would end the need for food banks. They didn’t necessarily see it as a partisan issue rather a matter of “common humanity.” As one volunteer noted: “With this Universal Credit, we’re going to start seeing a lot more people coming to the food bank.” Another volunteer commented: “This shouldn’t be an end in and of itself. It should be a stop-gap.”

Earlsfield food bank is independent (re: not a member of the Trussell Trust network) and they intend to stay that way. They commented that “too many people are falling through the cracks” if they have to go to a local government agency or social service provider first to get a referral for a food parcel. A volunteer explained: “People ask me how often they can come in a month. I tell them to come whenever they need food. That’s the only referral they need. We’ll walk with the person as long as they need us to.”

Earlsfield Food Bank would run out of food in a matter of just a few weeks if the donations stopped coming. They recently formed a donor relationship somewhat serendipitously with two young entrepreneurs starting a boiler repair business in the borough. They shop for items on a monthly basis that the food bank needs and drops them off at the church hall. The food bank only takes non-perishable items because they have limited storage (this seems to be the case among most independent and Trussell Trust food banks, based on my visits and conversations at the Birmingham conference). Their aim is “not to store” food because that means they would risk becoming a permanent organization. It struck me as a catch-22 situation, as expressed by the volunteers and local pastor: They are clear about their intention to serve a temporary need, though they have seen an increase in the number of guests they serve to the tune of 200% in three years. They do not have paid staff and rely on the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) – a broader alliance and network of independent food banks – to connect them with advocacy opportunities and/or to represent their commitment to ending food banking in the UK.

Site visit #2: Wandsworth Foodbank, a Trussell Trust affiliate, London, England



Sarah, founder of Wandsworth Foodbank and Dan, current Foodbank manager at the flagship location at St. Mark's Church

In contrast to my site visit in the Earlsfield neighborhood of the Wandsworth borough, the Wandsworth Foodbank – also housed in an Anglican church – is an affiliate of the Trussell Trust Network. This food bank at St. Mark's Church is the central hub for 5 Trussell Trust Foodbanks operating throughout the Wandsworth Borough. Donations come directly to

this address, are sorted and distributed to the other food banks. Wandsworth is a borough that is characterized by the juxtaposition of extreme wealth and deprivation. Nearly half of the children in Wandsworth reside in poverty. Currently the Foodbank is distributing 5,000 food parcels per year to 1,200 unique households, including around 1,000 children.

There is a food bank open in Wandsworth every day. The central hub is open on Tuesdays and Friday for approximately 3 hours. The day that I visited I had the opportunity to meet the founder and trustee of the Wandsworth Foodbank, Sarah Chapman; the one full-time paid manager, Dan Frith; and about a half dozen volunteers. I was also able to observe about 10 families/individuals coming in for parcels of food, as well as a mental health counsellor on-site providing support and resources. The set-up felt something like a coffee shop. There were several clusters of comfortable chairs and couches where guests could sit around a coffee table, be served tea and fresh fruit by volunteers, have their referrals checked by a volunteer, and then wait to speak to a counsellor and/or receive their food parcel. It was airy and bright with lots of natural light, creating a pleasant environment despite the rain falling outside.

Sarah told me that there are nearly 40,000 volunteers working at Trussell Trust Foodbanks. Volunteers interacting with guests, she remarked, was a very important advocacy and organizing opportunity. She said: "You can see the injustice rising among volunteers as they interact with clients." Sarah, who coordinates on a volunteer basis the research, communications and advocacy work of the Wandsworth Foodbank, has been able to harness this indignation to influence policy locally. She spearheaded an effort to fill the public gallery where local council members were meeting with volunteers and clients. Their collective presence and voice led to a subsistence scheme now available to those who are having problems receiving their benefits in a timely fashion.

The component that most distinguishes the Trussell Trust Foodbanks from many independent food banks is that to receive a food parcel each client must have a referral from a social service agency. Each food bank works with a different set of frontline professionals such as doctors, health visitors, social workers, in addition to other local social service providers such as housing associations, welfare agencies and children's centers. These agencies meet with families and individuals to gather basic information about the particular crisis the individual or family is facing in order to provide guidance to address the underlying cause and to issue a referral voucher for emergency food. A

voucher can be exchanged for a three-day supply of emergency food from a Trussell Trust Foodbank.

It remains unclear to me is how many vouchers per year an individual or family can obtain to access a 3-day supply of emergency food. Some reports say that Trussell Trust allows a client to use no more than 9 vouchers per year. Other reports indicate that Trussell Trust Foodbanks expect people to be referred to them no more than three times in any 6-month period. Such policies are in keeping with the Trussell Trust's "no growth" strategy. As Sarah remarked: "We don't want to build too much infrastructure because we don't want to be here for the long term." The Wandsworth Foodbank's [annual research project](#) which provides feedback in the form of data and stories directly to the local council coupled with their advocacy efforts to hold local government accountable, are markers of their desire to end the need for the food bank. And yet there doesn't seem to be an end anywhere near on the horizon with the Wandsworth Foodbank reporting an 11% increase in the number of local people in crisis referred to them in 2017-2018.

This increase became apparent to me when Dan, the Foodbank manager, took me into the church sanctuary which doubles as the Wandsworth Foodbank's warehouse of shelf-stable food. Along one wall of the sanctuary, just a foot or so away from the pews, shelves bursting with products are stacked floor to ceiling labelled according to item: rice, beans, tins of vegetables, etc. In 5 years-time the Foodbank has not stopped *needing* to expand to meet the demand.

The annual report doesn't stop at just presenting the problem as data points. The stories bring the situation of local people in crisis to life. And an analysis of *why* people are referred to the Wandsworth Foodbank points to a winnowing away of government support for workers, seniors, children, and other vulnerable citizens as the underlying cause:

- For the fifth year running, benefit problems such as delay, change and sanction were the most common causes of foodbank referral (41% of referrals). This was followed by low income from work or benefits (27%), debt (9%) and No Recourse to Public Funds (5%).
- In-work poverty (the working poor) was seen as a growing problem by referral agencies – with 75% citing zero-hours contracts and 63% citing low pay as key reasons why paid work did not protect their clients in working households from

needing to use the Foodbank in the previous year. 40% of guests surveyed were in households where at least one person was in paid work.

Their carefully documented research is accompanied by specific demands that can be met on the local level, city level and national level:

- We ask the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to urgently reconsider its sanctions policy.
- We ask that the government introduces policies that boost pay and offer greater protections to low-paid workers.
- We ask that Wandsworth Borough Council works to tackle low pay locally by becoming a Living Wage accredited employer.
- We ask that the DWP takes action to improve the social security system so that it is more accessible, and less complex.
- We ask the DWP to urgently review Universal Credit Advance Payments.

Site Visit #3: The Food Point, a social supermarket serving homeless youth, London England

Centrepunkt is a homeless charity in the UK that provides more than 10,000 homeless young people each year with practical and emotional support to find a job and live independently. They provide lodging in a central building for up to two years and an additional six months of support once they move out on their own. They provide accommodation, health support and life skills to get the youth back into education, training, and employment.



The Food Point co-founders Nadeen and Isabel

According to Centrepont 103,000 homeless youth asked for help last year due to violence, abuse, and problems with mental health. “Young people often become homeless because it’s safer to leave home than to stay,” according to the counselors on staff at Centrepont. The organization’s record is remarkable: 86% of the 10,000 referred to their facilities move into their own homes, connect back with their families, get their first jobs or go to university within 2.5 years of coming into contact with Centrepont.

It became clear to the dietitians working at Centrepont that the youth in their care were food insecure. 60% of young people in their services who were surveyed reported that they had skipped meals, gone to sleep hungry and eaten less because they couldn’t afford food. The staff dietitians work with the youth living on site to teach them about healthy eating and budgeting for food. But without enough money to buy nutritious food, the youth didn’t have the chance to practice these skills. That’s where [Food Point](#) comes in.

Centrepont’s dietitians Isabel Rice and Nadeen Hadair came up with the idea for The Food Point, a “social supermarket” which provides access to healthy, affordable food to youth living in an 80-bed Centrepont housing facility. They are in a pilot phase and have plans to reach every young person in their care by the end of 2019. Food Point is called a social supermarket because, instead of selecting from end-of-day donated food items, young people pay a nominal fee which gives them choice, dignity and autonomy.

Social supermarkets, according to a [research report](#) published in 2018 by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University, have been operating in many European countries throughout Europe since the 1980s but have only emerged in the UK in the past 5 years. Social supermarkets acquire surplus food (food not desirable to customers in mainstream supermarkets for a variety of reasons due to mislabeling, near sale date, blemishes on fruits and vegetables, etc.) and resell it at a heavily discounted rate to low-income consumers. Social supermarkets generally serve a targeted audience and provide other social services on site. The co-authors of the report, Drs. Saxena and Tornaghi, have coined the phrase “austerity retail” to describe the wider context of initiatives that sell food, instead of just giving it away, to those in the UK who have been most impacted by the loss of or reformed social welfare policies. Typically, social supermarkets adhere to varying degrees to three different but related social enterprise

goals: economic (affordability), social (support programs, skills building) and environmental (food waste).

Food Point, as a social supermarket, operates primarily at the intersection of economic and social impact goals. Having a “shop” on site at the Centrepoint facility also provides the youth they serve with one-on-one time with one of the dietitians who guides them through the shop. Young people have the option of fresh, frozen and shelf-stable long-life foods and are encouraged to buy items from different food groups. The team introduces them to foods many have never tried before and offers new recipe ideas. They have also set up a room where young people can enjoy a meal together once a week that’s been cooked by Centrepoint staff using ingredients from the shop.

I was invited to stop by The Food Point on the night the shop was open for business. I arrived in the late afternoon as Isabel and Nadeen were preparing for the communal meal and setting up the Food Point shop. Compared to the other food aid sites I had visited, this was one was full of items that I would find and purchase at my local food coop in Brooklyn and cook with – fresh and frozen vegetables, fruit, avocados, loose carrots, bags of lettuce and spinach, curry powder, healthy snack items and frozen chicken and meats. Cans of beans and tuna were on offer as well as dried pasta and rice – much of it organic and low sodium. Isabel explained that their food comes from [Food Share](#), a UK charity that redistributes surplus food to charities, and that they can request exactly what they want each week.

One of the mental health counselors was on call that evening to cook a meal from her Caribbean culture. She was preparing Jerk chicken, rice and beans, greens and pineapple for dessert. It would be served to the young people who gathered in the dining room next door. After the meal they would be invited to shop. All shoppers must sign up as an on-going member. When they register, each youth is provided with some basic cooking tools – a pot and pan, for instance, and a cloth shopping bag. Members pay three pounds for 15 items of their choice (equivalent to about 15 pounds worth of food). The dieticians are there to help with selection and to provide advice and suggestions about what to cook and how. The youth have communal kitchens on the floor of their residence halls where they can practice their cooking skills and keep their items refrigerated.

In conclusion

While not an exhaustive sample size, the encounters I describe above helped me to understand the nuanced tension more fully in the varying responses to food poverty in the UK. The provision of charity and the desire for better policies that ensure the most vulnerable and those in crisis do not fall into poverty were dually present in the conversations I had and the interactions I witnessed. What I did not get to experience first-hand but learned about at the Birmingham conference are the robust initiatives and efforts to bring people experiencing the harsh reality of austerity measures together with third sector organizations, food charity volunteers and even, in some cases, local government to analyze and take action collectively to ensure that food banks stay temporary while the safety net is woven back together and made stronger. For instance, [Food Power](#), a project of [Sustain](#), is organizing with local communities across the UK to develop food poverty action plans to tackle poverty at its root causes within local contexts. In tandem they are setting up peer mentorship and regional learning networks and conversations about how to engage folks living with poverty, or “experts by experience”. [Nourish Scotland](#) is at the forefront of developing strategies rooted in the understanding that poverty, and not a shortage of food, is what is causing an escalation of food insecurity across Scotland and the UK.

By bringing together many of the diverse players in this relatively young food poverty landscape in the UK at the Birmingham conference – from academics, to food charities, to advocacy campaigners, to people with lived experience — Dr. Garthwaite laid the groundwork for the kind of inquiry, debate, and learning that can develop into shared analysis and broad-based alliances needed to build and sustain a strong force for social transformation and an end to poverty. And by encouraging the participation of allies in Canada and the U.S., those alliances are forming not only in the UK but across the pond.