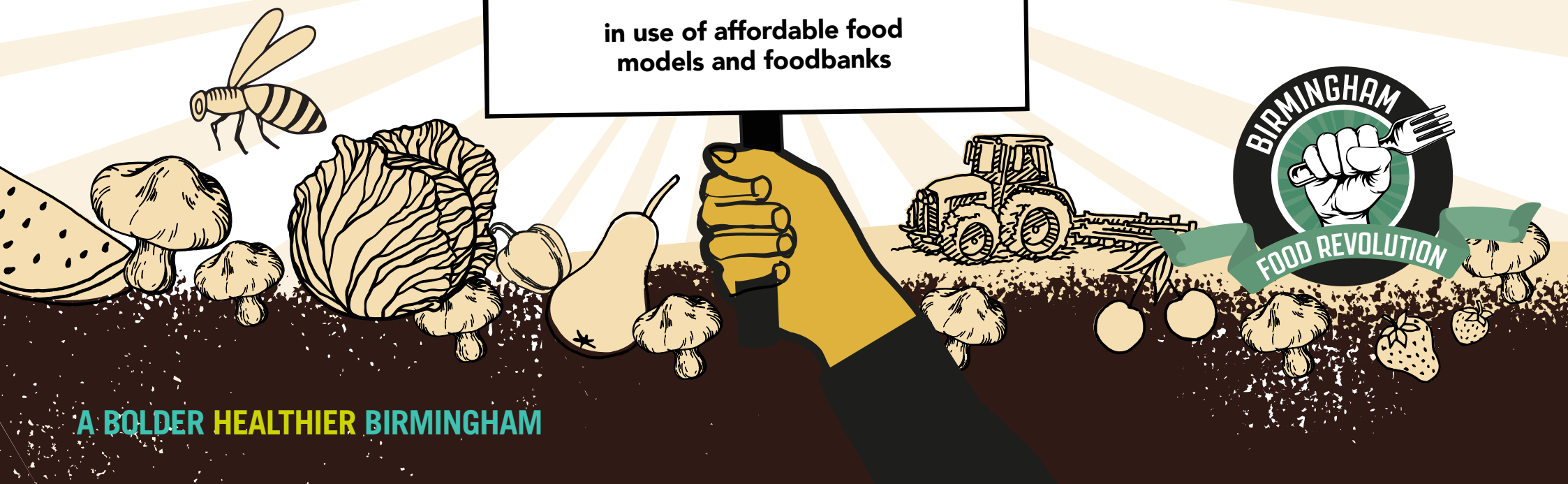
Birmingham City Council

ADDRESSING STIGMA AND SHAME

in use of affordable food models and foodbanks



A BOLDER HEALTHIER BIRMINGHAM

Addressing stigma and shame in use of affordable food models and foodbanks

In the November 2021 meeting of the Birmingham Creating a Healthy Food City forum, the stigma and shame associated with foodbanks was highlighted as a key factor in preventing people from accessing services they need. This issue is becoming increasingly important with the cost of living crisis leading to greater numbers of people struggling to afford food. This rapid review aims to present factors which contribute to a sense of shame and stigma in using foodbanks and put forward recommendations to mitigate this and help people access the support they need without feeling ashamed. In this review we discuss both foodbanks and affordable food models. For the purposes of this discussion, foodbanks are considered as a service which clients in acute crisis are referred to with a voucher, and where they receive a free parcel of pre-specified food, while affordable food models generally give the individual more choice and make the food more affordable through lower prices or 'pay as you feel' methods (eg. food clubs, social supermarkets, food pantries).

National and local factors

Something that plays a significant role in stigmatising use of foodbanks and other affordable food models is the national narrative in this area [1-3]. Specifically, the political discourse including language used by MPs around lack of cooking and/or budgeting skills or recklessness leading to people needing to use these services adds a considerable sense of shame to the idea of using a foodbank [2]. For example, in May 2022, Lee Anderson MP said in the House of Commons: "there's not this massive use for foodbanks in this country… we've got generation after generation who cannot cook properly, they can't cook a meal from scratch, they cannot budget…"[4]. While in depth discussion of the reasons for foodbank use is beyond the scope of this review, research suggests that the primary reasons for using foodbanks are changes to welfare as a result of the UK government's austerity policies and a lack of resources rather than an individual's lack of skills [5].

Furthermore, TV shows popularised during the period of austerity policies in the UK portraying the lives of benefit recipients, sometimes described as "poverty porn", have further fuelled these attitudes by depicting people accessing foodbanks as "scoungers" (a word commonly used by participants in the qualitative literature) – people trying to get away with not working, lazily living off the state [1, 3, 6]. However, while there may be a minority living like this, most are simply trying to make ends meet with what they have and work hard to utilise their resources effectively, and this narrative increases the stigma associated with being on benefits and using foodbanks.

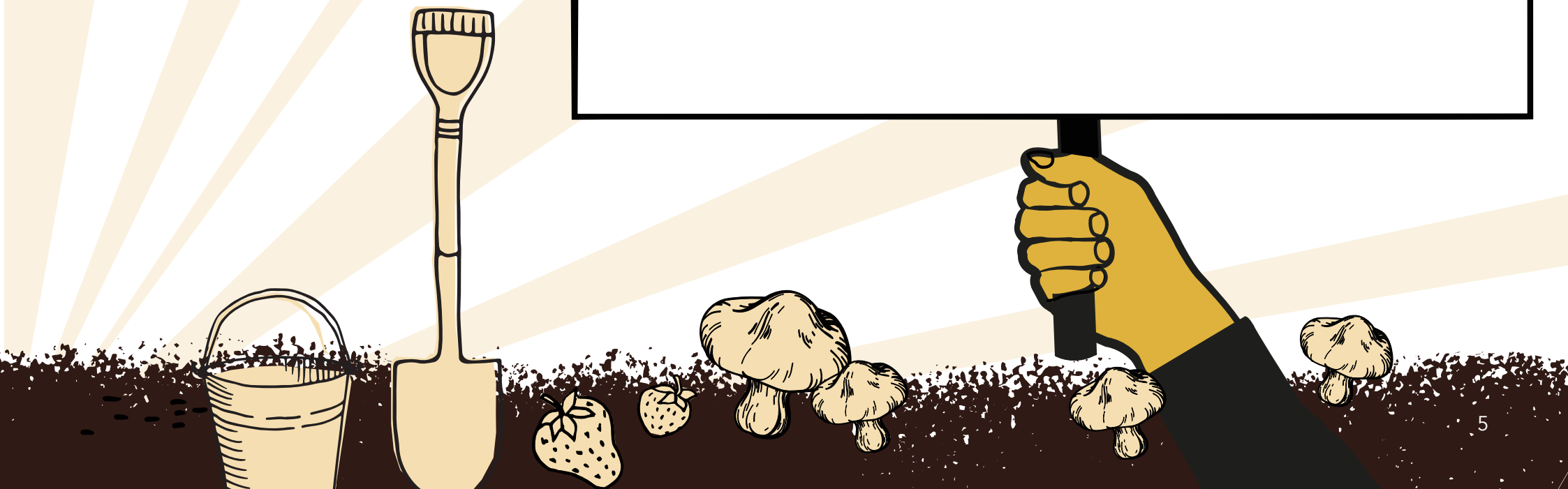
With this prevailing narrative, individuals internalise notions that needing to use foodbanks is due to internal factors rather than external, which stigmatises foodbank use and is the most prominent reason for people feeling ashamed and embarrassed about accessing food support [1, 3, 7].

Studies show that feelings of shame are generally most present prior to the individual actually using the foodbank, with such feelings actually diminishing for many upon use of a foodbank due to friendly staff and meeting others experiencing similar things [1, 8, 9]. Thus, this internalising narrative of people needing to use foodbanks through their own fault plays a key role in stigmatising foodbank use. While online local newspapers from the West Midlands may be more sensitive to the struggles that foodbank users are facing, foodbank users themselves speak of the stigma associated with foodbank use, and people commenting on stories about foodbank users speak of "scroungers" and "parasites", suggesting this is still a prevailing narrative in the West Midlands [10]. With the current cost of living crisis in the UK, there is an opportunity to shift the narrative to show individuals that in many cases, it is external causes that lead to people struggling to afford.

Negative encounters with the welfare system have also been described as a potential cause of shame for individuals. While not specifically related to use of foodbanks and affordable food models, experiences of a system described as "punitive" and "degrading" including a lack of support and guidance around the system and stigmatising and/or unfair treatment (particularly in medical assessments) may compound perceptions of it being internal rather than external factors which lead to people struggling to afford food [3]. Overall, individuals experience a challenging and stigmatising system of services, and thus it is unsurprising that this shame is extended towards foodbanks.

Recommendations:

- Politicians to have a greater understanding of the reasons people struggle to afford food and use less stigmatising language.
- A more sensitive and accurate portrayal of people in the welfare system and using foodbanks in UK media.
- Change the narrative around why people use foodbanks – primarily due to changes to benefits and increasing costs of living rather than any fault of their own. For example, on websites and documents around accessing foodbanks etc, highlighting that having difficulties affording food is something an increasing number of people are experiencing in the UK, often generally due to factors beyond the individual's control. This could possibly be the focus point of a mass media campaign.
- Consider demonstrating experiences of foodbanks eg. through a video ("what it is like to attend a foodbank") or testimonials about people's positive experiences of foodbanks.
- Improve individuals' experiences of welfare system access points and decrease stigmatising experiences.



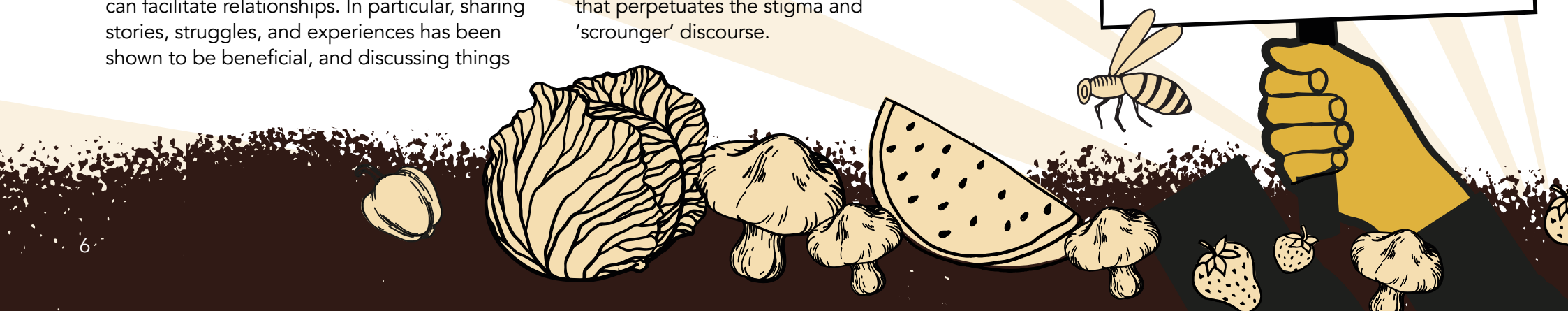
Factors specific to foodbanks and affordable food models

As previously mentioned, often individuals feel most stigmatised prior to using a foodbank and then once they actually visit one, these feelings of shame abate. This diminishing of shame happens primarily due to two factors: the service's physical environment and the service's social environment. The physical environment can help abate predetermined feelings of shame and stigma by providing a welcoming place to be. Examples of how this relaxed and welcoming atmosphere can be fostered in the literature include tables being set out in a café style, the tables having nice tablecloths, plates with biscuits and bowls of sugar where people can help themselves, the smell of coffee, and the sound of a kettle boiling [1, 6].

There is also an element of social support to foodbanks and affordable food models. These services can be a place where individuals meet similar people with shared experiences and struggles [7, 9]. Interacting with others, while waiting to receive food or having a hot drink, can facilitate relationships. In particular, sharing stories, struggles, and experiences has been shown to be beneficial, and discussing things with people who have had similar experiences can be destigmatising and also contribute to the sense of having to use foodbanks being due to external rather than internal factors as described above by fostering a sense of "we're all in this together" [11]. One study explained that this phenomenon (described as "confession" by the authors) allowed them to "recreate a sense of self away from the shame" [6]. Further to this, laughter and enjoying time together can be a useful way of defocusing on shame [6].

Volunteers can be important in experiences of shame and stigma while utilising a foodbank or affordable food models. Often, the friendliness of volunteers in welcoming in clients is one of the things that most destigmatises the use of this service [7]. A lack of judgement and a perceived lack of social distance between volunteer and client can be very positive, and also volunteers can play a role in facilitating client to client relationships as described above [7]. However, sometimes volunteers can act in a way that perpetuates the stigma and 'scrounger' discourse.

Interacting with others, while waiting to receive food or having a hot drink, can facilitate relationships.



This can be through expecting a high level of gratitude, especially when clients are receiving food for free, and looking down on foodbank users [8, 11, 12]. There are also reports of volunteers deeming people as worthy or unworthy of using the service based on how they dress and the healthfulness of foods they buy (the later in the case of an affordable food model rather than a foodbank where there is no choice) [8,]. Another study describes lots of stigmatising behaviour of a foodbank manager through deeming people worthy or unworthy through their punctuality, how much/well they are looking after their children, expressions of verbal gratitude and politeness and not asking for additional food [13]. This study describes people being moved up the queue if they are deemed to be polite and having their hot drink or toast taken away if they are deemed impolite or disrespectful [13]. Some mothers were told off for not attending to their children properly, which lead some leaving in tears and not returning [13]. With this in mind, there is a particular value of the volunteer being someone who has used the service before or is currently using the service, as they are less likely to judge clients based on worthiness or gratitude.

A lack of choice of food or poor quality food is another thing that can perpetuate the stigma of foodbank use amongst clients. Papers report that poor quality food, for example food past its sell-by date or rotting, made people feel ashamed and undignified [8, 12, 14]. Furthermore, clients sometimes received foods that they didn't know how to prepare, which didn't go together, were not culturally appropriate or that they did not like [15]. Foodbank users described a sense of powerlessness due to receiving foods they don't like, but they knew that the foodbank was doing its best [14]; furthermore, clients who brought a list of foods they wanted or liked (or did not like) were perceived as entitled by volunteers, linking to the issues of volunteers and gratitude as described above [11, 12]. Ways that these issues can be overcome include asking people what they normally like to eat or if they have a preference, or putting recipe boxes of foods which go together well [16]. Another study found that it would be helpful to also give items such as vegetable oil, salt, or spices in the food parcel to make the food easier to cook or more tasty [14]. Another study described using "stigma-management approaches" such as cooking classes for people with limited equipment at the foodbank to help people feel more empowered. Additionally, there are issues with the amount of food that these models are able to provide, which lead to methods which may be stigmatising for individuals. Foodbanks and other models report having lower supplies in recent months, due to cost of living increases and other factors. For many years, foodbanks in the Trussell Trust have used a voucher system to prioritise need and ensure that limited resources are given to those who need them most i.e. those who are experiencing an acute food crisis [11]. As such, these vouchers have been an important component of keeping the foodbank running and ensuring resources are utilised effectively. However, requiring vouchers can be stigmatising, for example if people are turned away because they don't have a voucher or because details on the voucher are incorrect [11].

These vouchers also end up creating a distinction between 'worthy' and 'unworthy', although not directly at the coalface of the foodbank. This process frees foodbank volunteers from the moral responsibility of deciding who is and isn't worthy of assistance which enables a non-judgemental stance (termed 'moral outsourcing), which may make the role of volunteer easier [17]. Thus, this balance of assessed need through vouchers vs. an 'everyone's welcome' approach can be complex due to the limited amounts of food available.

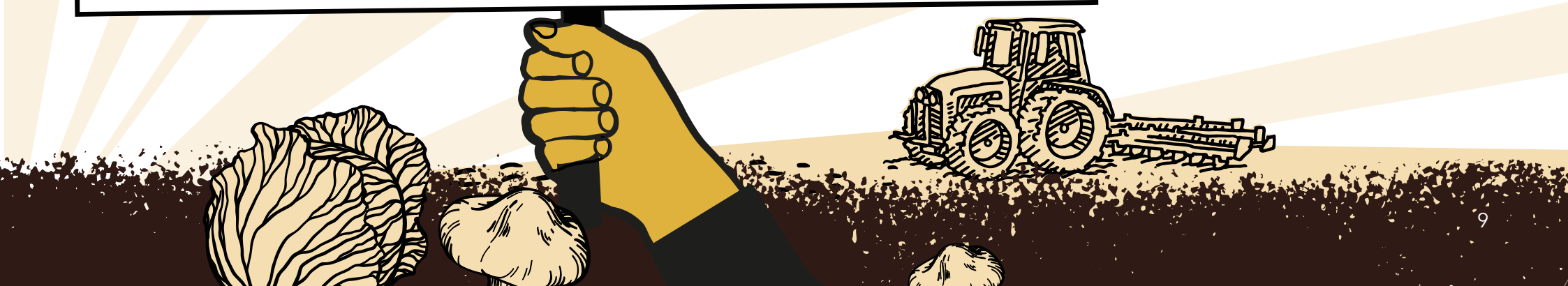
Given the potentially stigmatising nature of the lack of choice of food given out for free at a foodbank, there may be a role for other affordable food models in addition to foodbanks [18]. While foodbanks may continue to be needed for those experiencing acute food crises, other models which allow people to pay for food in some way may provide a halfway house between using a foodbank and purchasing food at normal price in a shop.

Pay as you feel options may enable more people to utilise these services as they can 'pay' with time, such as volunteering themselves or litter-picking. Paying for food, whether by money or other services, may destigmatise using affordable food models and increase dignity of individuals needing help to afford food. One study described that individuals felt embarrassed about coming out of a church with shopping bags as they were obviously visiting a foodbank – an affordable food model such as a food club, food pantry or social supermarket may circumnavigate this issue [1].

Furthermore, research suggests that a principal way to overcome the shame and indignity of using a foodbank is to enable freedom and choice of food, providing the opportunity for mutuality, reciprocity, and interdependence [18]. Affordable food models may help people to have a choice of foods – for example, social supermarket models may enable people to shop as they would in a supermarket but with cheaper prices. Foodbanks could signpost to these services to help people move towards using these services when resources allow. Research suggests that it is vital to ensure that signage and prices are correct in these types of models as otherwise people can calculate prices incorrectly, which can lead to embarrassment at the till, especially if they have to then put foods back [8]. The importance of a simple layout, signage, and payment in such models is also emphasised in the literature [8]. There is variation in other affordable food models providing a choice, which may be again due to limited resources – however, this evidence suggests that affordable food models should aim to provide clients with the ability to choose foods if possible [18]. Local food hubs may be an opportunity to link individuals with local, small-scale producers [19]. Social eating initiatives and community cafes may also increase dignity through providing people with hot, tasty food and giving people the opportunity to talk to people like them [20]. They may also play a role in signposting to other services [20].

Recommendations:

- Foodbanks make small changes to help create a more welcoming atmosphere eg. tablecloths on tables, plates with biscuits, tea and coffee etc.
- Foodbanks facilitate clients meeting and sharing struggles eg. waiting area with table and hot drinks.
- Foodbank volunteers work to be as kind, friendly, and interested as possible and try to not judge clients or expect gratitude
- Foodbanks ensure food is in date and/or good quality.
- Foodbanks aim to put foods together which go together or help people understand how to prepare foods.
- Foodbanks aim to provide culturally appropriate foods and listen to people's preferences.
- Foodbanks include things in the food parcel which make things easier to cook eg. vegetable oil, salt, spices.
- Foodbanks provide or signpost to other services, such as cooking classes and other affordable food models where individuals have more of a choice and can pay low prices of food.
- Foodbanks to consider role of voucher vs. 'everyone's welcome' approach in the context of their resources.
- Councils and food partnerships/networks to consider facilitating more affordable food models, where people can pay as they feel and choose foods.
- Affordable food models to ensure pricing is accurate and there is simple layout and signage.
- Greater connectivity between local services such as foodbanks, affordable food models, social eating initiatives, community cafes and other services so that signposting is possible.

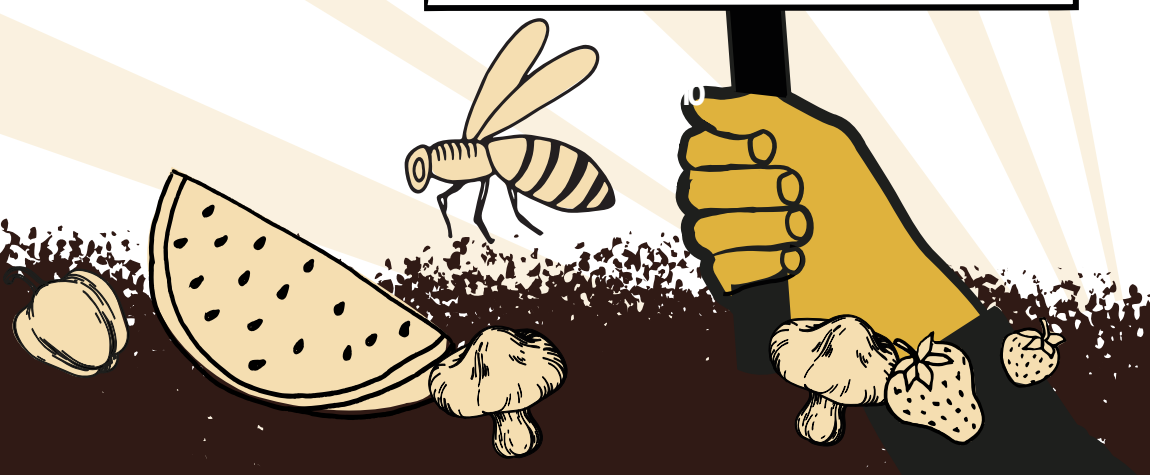


Addressing the root causes of poverty

Fundamentally, use of foodbanks arises because people are not able to afford food, which in itself is perceived as shameful and stigmatising. Thus, providing people with the means to afford food by addressing the root causes of poverty is the only way to truly prevent foodbank use and the shame and stigma associated with it. IFAN use the hierarchy of approaches shown in the placard (right), which go from addressing the root causes of poverty to not addressing them as you move down, leading to more people needing to use food banks [21]: Thus, the primary way to prevent the shame and stigma associated with foodbank use is to ensure that all people are paid enough to be able to afford adequate and nutritious food. This can be through companies paying the living wage to workers or ensuring that social security payments are high enough for people on benefits. Birmingham has committed to becoming a Living Wage City and around 7,000 workers across Birmingham have seen their income increase as a result of more city employers committing to paying the living wage [22]. However, there are still many citizens in Birmingham who do are not paid the living wage. It is also worth noting that healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables tend to be more expensive than unhealthy foods and reducing the cost of healthy foods relative to unhealthy foods would be beneficial for all, though this is beyond the scope of this review [23].

The IFAN hierarchy of approaches. [21]

1. Adequate benefit payments and fair wages (social security payments must be adequate, accessible and timely and wages need to match the cost of living)
2. Statutory cash grants (available through local authorities to support people falling into financial crisis)
3. Charitable cash grants (when statutory cash grants aren't available, provision of charitable cash grants enables people unable to afford food to make their own choices)
4. Vouchers and affordable food models
5. Emergency food parcels and food banks



Cash-first approaches are increasingly being suggested as an alternative to food vouchers and food banks. This involves local authorities providing direct, easily accessible cash payments to people in financial crisis [21]. Cash transfers empower individuals through enabling them to make their own decisions about what they need[24].

It increases dignity through giving people a choice of what to spend money on and giving them the ability to shop around and get value for money. Cash payments can enable purchasing of foods according to preference, culture and dietary requirements, preventing the shame and stigma of using foodbanks as described above. Such cash transfers are a simple and cost-effective way to deliver and access crisis support as they go directly into people's bank accounts and remove the need for complex or expensive partnership agreements. They have been demonstrated to improve health and reduce health inequalities and can build financial resilience when coupled with advice and support to help maximise income and prevent debt. There are also benefits the local economy as people spend money in their own neighbourhoods and communities, supporting local, independent retailers.

IFAN has recently developed the leaflet "Worrying about money? Support is available in Birmingham" in collaboration with a number of partners in the city including the council [25]. This gives details of council support schemes, suggests how to maximise incomes, and signposts a number of different services where people can get free and confidential advice. It gives tailored options for people who suddenly have no money, whose money doesn't stretch far enough, who have debt and who are waiting on a benefit payment or advance. However, it is likely with the cost of living crisis that more people will need help in addition to advice and options which are already available.

Recommendations:

- Lobby for adequate benefits and living wage nationally
- Incentivise and encourage businesses to adopt the living wage in Birmingham
- Make direct, easily accessible cash payments available to people in financial crisis
- Increase publicity and sharing of the Birmingham cash-first leaflet

Incredible Surplus are an example of a food project in Birmingham who use a pay as you can approach

Summary

This rapid review aimed to present factors which contribute to a sense of shame and stigma in using foodbanks and put forward recommendations to mitigate this and help people access the support they need without feeling ashamed. Firstly, we discussed national and local factors which increase the stigma associated with foodbank use – these include the stigmatising narrative and national discourse in this area; the current cost of living crisis may provide the opportunity to change this narrative. It is suggested that feelings of shame may actually diminish upon use of a foodbank due to friendly volunteers and settings, and thus demonstrating experiences and testimonials of using foodbanks may be beneficial. Secondly, we discussed factors specific to foodbanks and affordable food models. The physical environment of a foodbank can help abate predetermined feelings of shame and stigma by making it a welcoming place. Foodbanks can also be a positive social environment where people can meet those with shared experiences; volunteers are key in making foodbanks welcoming or not as they can sometimes act in a way that perpetuates stigma such as expecting gratitude and politeness and/or deeming clients worthy or unworthy based on certain characteristics or actions. A lack of food choice and poor quality food can also increase feelings of shame and powerlessness, and thus there may be a role of affordable food models where people can choose food and pay lower prices for what they are buying. The role of vouchers in distinguishing between people who can and cannot use the foodbank is also something for consideration. Finally, we highlighted that they way to truly prevent the shame and stigma associated with foodbank use is to ensure people have enough money to afford food, through the living wage, adequate benefits, and a cash-first approach. Preventing the use of foodbanks is the key long term aim here, but in the short term there are actions which can be taken to decrease the shame and stigma associated with foodbanks, helping people to access the support they need when they need it.

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BIRMINGHAM FOOD REVOLUTION

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