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## **Still bleeding: The variegated geographies of austerity and food banking in rural England and Wales**

Jon May<sup>1</sup>, Andrew Williams<sup>2</sup>, Paul Cloke<sup>3</sup>, Liev Cherry<sup>4</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper builds on a nascent literature on rural austerity to explore the variegated geographies of austerity and food banking in rural areas of England and Wales. The paper makes three key contributions. First, drawing on a range of existing and newly updated datasets on local authority spending power and service spending, changes to welfare benefits, benefit sanctions, and local welfare assistance schemes we use the Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2011 Rural-Urban Classification of Local Authorities to provide the first comprehensive analysis of austerity in rural England and Wales. We outline the variegated nature of rural austerity and examine the ways in which new geographies of austerity are overwriting and compounding problems of rural poverty in the UK. Second, we combine newly available data from the Trussell Trust and Independent Food Aid Network to outline a geography of food banking in rural England and Wales, highlighting the uneven distribution of food aid across rural areas and discuss some of the problems rural locations pose to both those seeking and providing food aid. Third, drawing on interviews with food bank managers, volunteers and clients in two very different rural areas we examine how different rural contexts produce different experiences of and responses to poverty and food insecurity, paying particular attention to localised cultures of charity, welfare and deservingness. We conclude by setting out a new research agenda around which scholars might further explore the relationships between austerity, food insecurity and food banking in rural areas.

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<sup>1</sup> School of Geography, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London, E1 4NS, UK

<sup>2</sup> School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, CF10 3WA, UK

<sup>3</sup> Geography, College of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ, UK

<sup>4</sup> School of Geography, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London, E1 4NS, UK

## Introduction

Galvanised by claims that cities are at the ‘leading and bleeding edge of austerity’s ‘extreme economy’ (Peck 2012: 626) a growing number of scholars have begun to explore the impacts of ‘austerity urbanism’ (Davies and Blanco 2017; Fuller 2017; Hastings et al 2017). Through this lens, cities are framed as the major ‘victims and instigators’ of an ideologically-driven project to reduce public sector spending and the size of the state (Donald et al 2014: 5), devolve responsibility and economic risk onto local government (Clarke and Cochrane 2013), and further embed neoliberal logics of privatisation, responsibilisation and deservingness in welfare provision (May et al 2020). This focus on urban articulations of austerity echoes an earlier tendency to explore the vicissitudes of neoliberalism through an urban lens (May et al 2005) and is repeated in scholarship on the lived experiences of austerity and food insecurity, much of which has also had an urban focus (Andres and Round 2015; Douglas et al 2015; Garthwaite 2016; Hall 2015; Power et al 2017).

Yet, neither austerity (Tabb 2014) nor food insecurity are peculiarly urban conditions. Indeed there is now a well-established literature on rural food insecurity in North America (Buck-McFadyen 2015; Haynes-Maslow et al 2020) including work exploring the impacts of welfare reform (Harvey and Pickering 2010; Hooks et al 2016; Pickering et al 2006; Tickamyser et al 2007) rural food deserts (McEntree and Agyeman 2010, Morton and Blanchard 2007) and problems of accessing food aid (Gundersen et al 2017; Waity 2016). More broadly, fiscal austerity, neoliberal reform and food insecurity have been longstanding struggles in rural Latin America (De Almeida et al 2000), rural India (Walker 2008) and other regions subject to structural adjustment policies of trade liberalisation and state retrenchment (Moyo and Yeros 2005; Ferguson 2006). But despite recent calls to extend research (Milbourne 2016: 459) there are currently only a few studies of the impacts of austerity on rural areas of the UK – most of which are either limited by social group (Milbourne 2015) sector (McKee et al 2017) or location (Black et al 2019) or treat austerity as a backdrop for the study of financial hardship (Black et al 2019; Ward et al 2013) – and even fewer on food insecurity (Shucksmith and Schaftt 2012; Lambie-Mumford et al 2015) or rural food banking (Caplan 2018).

In this paper we build upon this important but still small body of work by examining the variegated geographies of austerity and food banking in rural England and Wales. Drawing on a larger project investigating the provision of emergency food aid across the UK - during which we interviewed ninety-one food bank managers, volunteers and clients, referral agents and other actors in twenty-two food banks across seven towns and cities in England and Wales - the paper makes three key contributions. First, we examine the ways in which new geographies of austerity are overwriting and compounding problems of rural poverty in the UK. Following a brief overview of the literature on rural poverty, we

combine the ONS's 2011 Rural-Urban Classification of Local Authorities with data on changes to local authority core spending power (MHCLG 2019c) service spending (Amin-Smith et al 2016) and the decline in per capita income as a result of cuts to welfare benefits (Beatty and Fothergill 2016) to provide the first comprehensive analysis of the impacts of austerity on rural England and Wales. Our analysis shows that though, in line with previous studies, cuts to local authority service spending (Hastings et al 2017) and welfare benefits (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016) have hit urban areas hardest, with the UK's most deprived urban areas suffering the most (Gray and Barford 2018), they have also hit the most deprived rural authorities disproportionately hard and worsened deprivation in those areas. We also show that some changes liable to have a direct and rapid impact on food insecurity - notably, benefit sanctions and cuts to Local Assistance Welfare Schemes – are more marked in rural than urban areas. Our purpose in drawing attention to this more variegated geography of austerity is not to recalibrate some kind of hierarchy of oppression, or pit the needs of poor people in rural areas against their urban counterparts, but simply to bring to light (Barrell 1983) both the severity and specificity of the problems austerity poses for people in rural areas in a context where these problems have until now remained largely invisible.

Second, while food banks have long been a feature of the welfare landscape in rural North America, very little is known about the nature and scale of food banking in rural areas of the UK. Using newly available data from the Trussell Trust (Trussell Trust 2018) and Independent Food Aid Network (Goodwin 2018) we outline a broad cartography of food banking in rural England and Wales, highlighting both the scale but also uneven distribution of food aid providers across rural areas. We then address several issues – around transport and service deprivation, the rural premium, stigma and shame – that are common to both rural poverty and the experiences of those providing and using food aid in rural areas.

Third, following suggestions that both the form and effects of austerity may differ in urban and rural areas (Milbourne 2016) we examine different ways in which austerity, food insecurity and rurality intersect and impact on people using and providing food aid. Here, rather than treat the rural as a singular form we examine how different rural contexts produce different experiences of, and responses to, poverty and food insecurity. We examine how the imposition of austerity governance and associated narratives of dependency and deservingness work out differently in two very different rural places; contrasting the experience of food banking in the conservative coastal and farming communities of South-West England and the working-class communities of the South Wales Valleys to show the continuing importance of local cultures of poverty, welfare and charity (Cloke et al 2007) in shaping the variegated geographies of austerity and responses to it.

## **1. Discourses of rural poverty**

In a review of the re-emergence of academic concern with problems of poverty in the late 1990s Milbourne noted a 'potentially dangerous assumption about the spatialities' evident in such work: namely, that it often appeared as though 'the city represents some kind of exclusive laboratory for the study of poverty' (2004: 563). With some notable exceptions (Cloke et al 1995a and b; Milbourne 2004, 2014; Woods 2005) problems of rural poverty continue to receive far less attention amongst UK academics and policy makers than urban poverty (Williams and Doyle 2016), for several reasons.

The first concerns the different forms of data available in the UK to study poverty. Since rural poverty is, by definition, more dispersed than urban poverty a traditional focus on patterns of concentrated poverty tends to radically under-estimate the extent of poverty in rural areas, if not render those problems wholly invisible (Milbourne 2014). Similarly, though the shift from basic measures of household income to more sophisticated 'market basket measures' provided a useful way to assess the multiple dimensions of poverty in cities, such measures are often either inappropriate to, or further obscure, assessments of rural poverty (Cloke et al 1995a and b). Prior to the introduction of the ONS's definition of urban and rural areas in 2004, and the subsequent classification of English (though not Welsh or Scottish) local authorities according to that definition in 2005, it was impossible to map the distribution of poverty in rural Britain. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) does now monitor a number of indicators of rural poverty (including the proportion of households with incomes below 60% of the national median household income) and from 2017 has provided estimates of the proportion of households in poverty at the middle layer super output area level (MSOAs) in England and Wales, but it is not possible to trace changes to this data pre-2017 or to compare it with similar data for Scotland or Northern Ireland.

Secondly, the relative invisibility of rural poverty in Britain may also be a product of its morphology: with a more dispersed population and few of the classic institutions of poverty (homeless shelters or soup kitchens, for example) bringing such problems in to the public gaze (Cloke et al 2000a). In a survey of homeless services in rural England, for example, Cloke et al (2000b) found that only 25% of local authorities provided any kind of emergency shelter, with both these shelters and temporary accommodation for homeless families tending to be concentrated in the main county town, with only limited if any services (and hence visibility) of homelessness across the wider county.

Thirdly, the disconnect between the presence of rural poverty on the one hand, and deep rooted, widely shared, and still powerful discourses of an idyllic and unchanging countryside on the other hand makes it difficult for many even to imagine problems of poverty in the UK countryside (Cloke et al 2000a). The precise nature of the 'rural idyll' circulating at different times and in different places varies

(Short 2006), but central to contemporary constructions are several core characteristics that mark out the British countryside as a distinctive socio-material space (Milbourne 2014). One obvious characteristic is the more limited infrastructure that is both a factor in the appeal of rural living and a key driver of rural poverty (Cloke et al 1995a). Another is a strong belief in the self-sufficiency of traditional rural households, and the mutual support of idealised rural communities. Crucially, these constructions seem to be internalised by many rural residents themselves – including poorer households, many of whom are reluctant to admit to difficulties that might be seen to contravene these constructions or, if recognising these difficulties, draw distinctions between the experience of poverty (produced by a lack of employment opportunities, for example) and a sense of (relative) deprivation (with such a lack understood as part and parcel, and a price worth paying, for living in the countryside) (Cloke and Little 2005; MacKrell and Pemberton 2018; Shucksmith 2016).

Discourses of the rural idyll thus not only obscure but exacerbate problems of rural poverty. They can also add to the stigma faced by poorer households. Not least – and counter-intuitively, perhaps - the close-knit nature of smaller rural communities may render any difficulties especially visible (Parr and Philo 2003; Cloke et al 2000a) whilst the gendered, heteronormative and racialised vision of domestic life the idyll draws upon and promotes means this stigma is especially marked for many women, gay people and people of colour (Chakraborti and Garland 2011; Little 2002). These constructions also have clear political ramifications. In the 1980s then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher turned to the apparent strength of the traditional nuclear family in rural areas to support arguments for the removal of welfare payments to people under the age of 18 (Cloke 1995). More recently, the ‘red Tory’ think tank ResPublica has sought to position rural areas as an ideal laboratory for their vision of a small state ‘Big Society’ (Leach 2011).

In some senses, then, it is not surprising that discussions of food insecurity and food banking in rural areas have received much less attention in the UK than in North America where rurality is more central to cultural representations of poverty (Pickering et al., 2006) and national measurements (USDA 1999) reveal food insecurity to be higher in rural than urban areas (see Molnar et al., 2001; Piontak and Schulman 2014).

But the last few years have seen a renewed interest in problems of rural poverty in the UK with one of the key features of the new work in this field a recognition of the need to contextualise studies of poverty within the local social and cultural contexts that shape the everyday experience of those on low income and local cultures of welfare and charity (Cloke et al 2007; Milbourne 2004, 2014; Sherman 2006; Shubin 2010). Others have sought to move beyond studies of the obfuscating effects of the idyll on rural poverty and explore instead some of the more progressive social and political movements

emerging in rural areas. For example, while the 'countryside' retains a prominent place in socially conservative and nationalist imaginaries in the UK (Woods 2005; Brooks 2019) nascent forms of a more radical rural politics are also evident around environmental activism (Halfacree 2007), refugee support (Gill et al 2017), action by farmers against unfair supermarket procurement practices, and trade union membership among low-paid rural migrant workers (Kuhlman and Vogeler 2020). It is in this context that we seek to investigate the socially and spatially uneven impacts of austerity in the UK countryside, but also the variegated response to austerity and problems of food insecurity evident in rural food banks: a response that sometimes builds on and is sometimes challenged by long histories of variegated 'local cultures of 'making do', self-sufficiency and informal support [that] ... dominate ideas of welfare assistance in rural places' (Milbourne 2016: 453).

## **2. New geographies of austerity**

Previous research traces several distinctive drivers of rural poverty in the UK. Most notably, with many areas dominated by low wage, casualised, part-time and seasonable employment (Ray et al 2014), low incomes play a more prominent role than unemployment in whether a household falls in to poverty in rural England and Wales (Milbourne 2011; Williams and Doyle 2016). Thus, though employment levels are higher in rural than urban areas of England, median workplace earnings are lower (DEFRA 2018) and whilst those in low-wage work have to rely on benefits to supplement their incomes the proportion of benefits up-take by eligible households is significantly lower in rural than in urban areas (Smith et al 2010); reflecting both the difficulties households can have in accessing information and advice, and a reluctance of some to claim because of a desire to avoid any perception of 'welfare dependency' (Williams and Doyle 2016).

Rural England has much lower levels of social rented housing and much higher levels of owner occupation than England's larger towns and cities. Combined with lower household incomes and a more general shortage of housing, predominantly rural areas also have much higher housing affordability ratios (DEFRA 2018), a problem made worse in highly desired rural areas through rural gentrification, second homes and 'retirement hotspots' (Smith 2002). As well as less affordable, rural housing is typically less energy efficient and more expensive to heat than housing in urban areas, with a higher proportion of households suffering fuel poverty. In England 14% of households in rural villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings experience fuel poverty compared with 11% of urban households (DEFRA 2018). In Wales 42% of rural households live with fuel poverty (compared to 22%

in urban areas) and in 2016 21% of social housing and 46% of local authority housing failed to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (Barnard 2018).

Many rural households also face difficulties accessing essential services, with a much lower proportion of rural residents living within a reasonable distance of services such as hospitals, pharmacies and General Practitioners, but also supermarkets and banks (see Table 1). Problems of access to services are exacerbated by more limited, but more expensive, transport options (Ward et al 2013). Whilst public transport is restricted and shrinking in many rural areas, households running a car face higher petrol and diesel costs, with households in rural hamlets and isolated dwellings spending on average 15.1% of their weekly disposable income (£132) on transport costs (£58 more a week than their urban counterparts) (DEFRA 2018). Taken together, rural households therefore face a significant ‘rural premium’, spending between 10-20% more on everyday goods and services than households in urban areas (Smith et al 2010), with this premium especially difficult for those on low incomes.

<b>% of population living more than 4km from</b>	<b>In Urban areas</b>	<b>In Rural areas</b>
Bank or Building Society	3%	59%
General Practitioner	0%	20%
Pharmacy	0%	45%
Convenience Store	0%	33%
Supermarket	0%	44%
8km from a Hospital	3%	45%

Table 1 Geographical distance of urban and rural households from essential services (Source: DEFRA 2013).

Many of these problems are being compounded by the cuts to public spending ushered in by austerity. The most extensive cuts to public spending under austerity have fallen on local authority revenue grants, social care and welfare benefits. In 2017 the Local Government Association reported a 77% reduction in the revenue grant allocated by central government to English local authorities 2015 to 2022 and suggested that cuts would leave local authorities with a funding gap of £5.8 billion and

several facing bankruptcies (Bounds 2017). Spending on adult social care in England declined by £7.7 billion between 2010 and 2019 (Butler 2019) and spending on welfare benefits by £37 billion between 2010 and 2021 (Butler 2018). Cuts to local authority spending have been less severe in Wales than in England, but still significant, with real term cuts of £543 million between 2009/10 and 2016/17 (Ogle et al 2017) whilst the Valley authorities of South Wales (which include both ex-industrial and rural areas) have experienced some of the biggest losses in per capita annual income as a result of cuts to benefits of any area in the UK (Beatty and Fothergill 2016).

In this section we examine the geographical distribution at local authority level of a range of cuts engendered by austerity - and recent processes of local state restructuring - to local authority spending power and service spending, welfare benefits and local assistance schemes, and public, private and voluntary welfare and other services – paying particular attention to differences between urban and rural authorities. As we stressed in the opening part of the paper, our aim is not to challenge the severity of these cuts in the UK’s most deprived urban areas – or to pit claims of the rural over the urban poor in some way - but simply to highlight the severity of these cuts on the poorest households in rural areas too so as not to lose sight of the needs of these households.

Our analysis of service spending cuts uses Institute of Fiscal Studies data (Amin-Smith et al 2016) which aggregates all revenue accruing to shire districts, combined waste/transport authorities and the Greater London Authority to the level of unitary authority/shire county. To enable longitudinal comparison between 2009/10 and 2016/17 it excludes spending on education, police, fire, new public health grants and new responsibilities relating to social care. To assess the impact of rural government restructuring we compare the core spending power of local authorities between 2014/15 to 2018/19 (MHCLG 2019b). Information on the number of libraries, children and youth centres in each local authority which have closed since 2010 comes from a Freedom of Information request made by Unison (2019), which had an 83% response rate (n=330 out of 398 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales).

Data on the total estimated cost of all welfare reforms 2010/11 to 2020/21 is taken from an update of Beatty and Fothergill’s (2016) data provided to us by the authors<sup>5</sup>. Our analysis of referral and sanction data uses as the numerator “Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) Sanctions: Number of Decisions”

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<sup>5</sup> This dataset includes changes to Housing Benefit (Local Housing Allowance and Under-occupation in the social rented sector (aka the ‘Bedroom Tax’); Non-dependant deductions; Benefit cap ; Council Tax Support; Personal Independence Payment; Employment and Support Allowance, Child Benefit, Tax Credits, and 1 per cent up-rating. Data on pre-2015 reforms is based on analysis of actual outturn by March 2016, while data on estimated cost of all welfare reforms 2010-2020 was updated by Beatty and Fothergill in March 2019 to include all Government welfare policy announcements (U-turns) or adjustments in Budgets since 2015 to 2018.

(DWP Stat-Xplore, 2020), which counts all sanctions decisions for the post 22nd October 2012 Sanction Regime. As the denominator, we use ONS Nomis “Jobseeker’s Allowance stocks and flows by duration” (2020). Referral and sanction rates are calculated by total decisions made divided by the total claimant months between November 2012 to October 2019<sup>6</sup>. We use the most comprehensive dataset relating to changes in Local Welfare Assistance Schemes 2013/14 to 2018/19 gathered through a Freedom of Information Request made by Aitchison (2018)<sup>7</sup>. Finally, whilst previous studies of austerity in the UK have not included an urban-rural classification, with shire counties and districts taken as proxy for rurality (Hastings et al 2017), local government classifications also do not neatly map onto rural-urban classification - resulting in an underestimation of the impact of welfare reform and service spending cuts on rural areas. Yet according to the 2011 ONS classification, one in five (11 of 56) Unitary Authorities are Predominantly Rural (Central Bedfordshire, Cornwall, Durham County, East Riding of Yorkshire, Herefordshire, Isle of Wight, Isles of Scilly, Northumberland, Rutland, Shropshire, Wiltshire) with a further eight unitary authorities classified as Urban with Significant Rural (Bath & North East Somerset, Bedford, Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, North Lincolnshire, North Somerset, Redcar & Cleveland, West Berkshire) underlining the importance for a definitive focus on rural austerity.

Running data from the Institute of Fiscal Studies on local authority service spending (Amin-Smith et al 2016) through the ONS rural-urban classification it is clear that at an aggregate level cuts to local service spending have hit urban areas hardest (Hastings et al 2017) with a greater proportion of urban (38.1%) than rural (30.2%) authorities experiencing cuts of 20% or more. The pattern is largely the same with regards cuts to welfare benefits. For example, combining Beatty and Fothergill’s (2016) dataset on changes to benefit payments 2010/11 to 2020/21 (Figure 1) with the ONS 2011 Rural-Urban Classification and Index of Multiple Deprivation (2019) a familiar picture emerges with people in urban authorities more likely to see a reduction in annual income as a result of welfare ‘reform’ than residents of rural areas. For example, whilst 48.1% (n=87) of urban local authorities have lost an average £650 or more per working age adult per year in income through cuts or reductions to benefits,

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<sup>6</sup> We use a measure of the number of sanction decisions made rather than the total number of persons sanctioned to account for people who receive multiple sanctions. The ONS Nomis data gives monthly claimant count from November 2012 to October 2019 which were aggregated to give the total number of claimant months (not claimants) in each local authority. The referral and sanction rates denote the percentage of claimant months referred for a sanction in each local authority, and received an adverse sanction decision, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Where information was unavailable, we updated the database using research on LWAS conducted in the same period (Ayrton et al 2019), taking the total number to 164 local authorities.

this scale of cuts is evident in only 11.1% (n=10) and 18.5% (n=10) of Predominantly Rural and Urban with Significant Rural areas respectively (see Table 2).

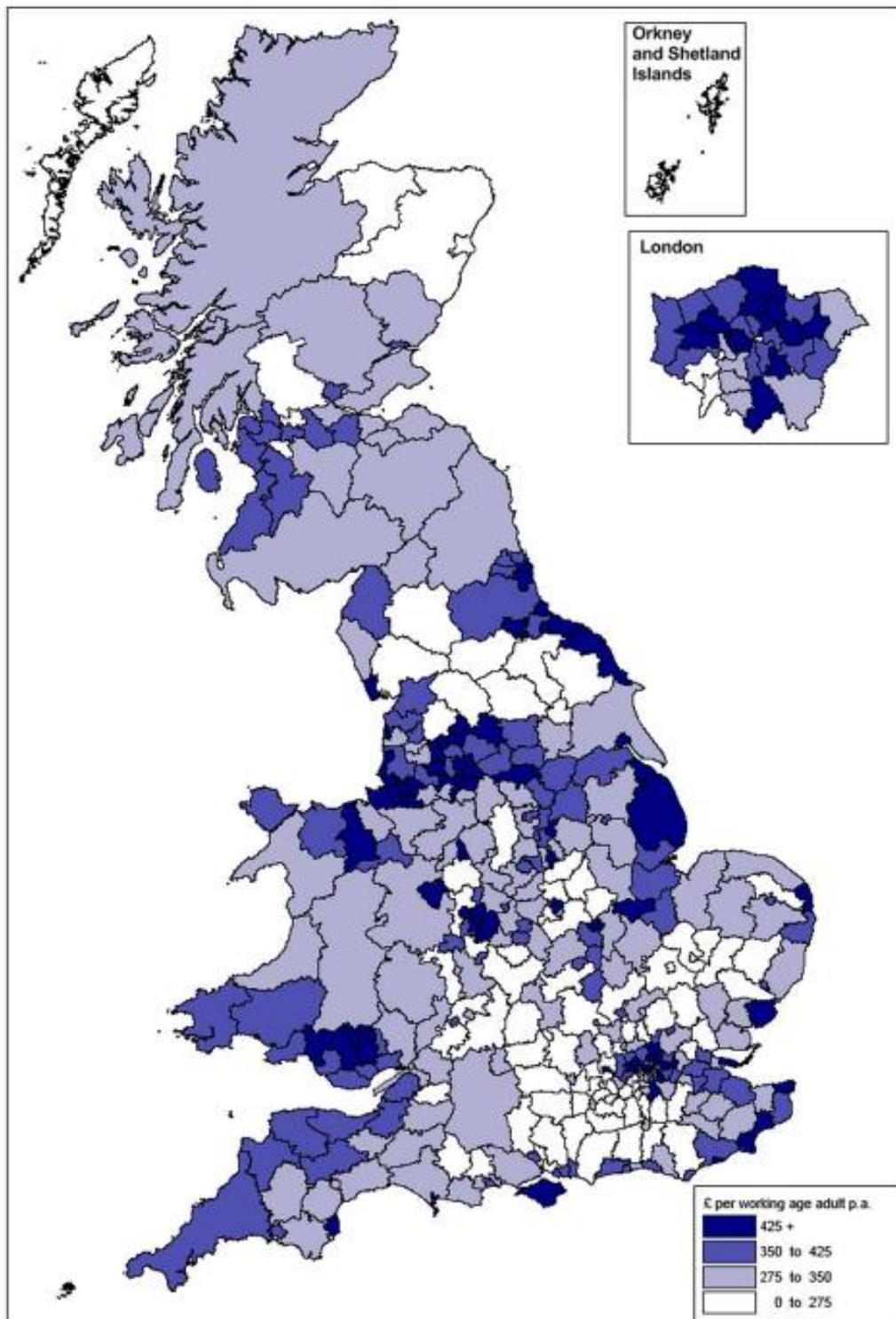


Figure 1: Estimated loss arising from welfare reform by March 2016, by district (Reproduced from Beatty and Fothergill 2016)

	<b>Number of Local Authorities</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Lower Quartile</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Upper Quartile</b>	<b>St. Dev.</b>
<b>Predominantly Rural</b>	90	337	817	429.00	504.87	473.00	566.00	108.031
<b>Predominantly Urban</b>	181	161	1220	537.00	646.74	643.00	758.00	170.297
<b>Urban with Significant Rural</b>	54	314	838	432.00	531.31	483.00	614.00	131.282

Table 2: Total impact of all welfare reforms (pre and post-2015) to 2020/21: Financial loss per working age adult £ per year \*Excluding Isles of Scilly (Data source: Beatty and Fothergill 2016)

Within this general pattern, a second trend is also evident. As Gray and Barford (2018) have shown, nationally the most severe cuts have fallen on the most deprived (urban) authorities. Our data shows this relationship to hold true across rural as well as urban authorities. For example, whilst 9 of 11 of England's least deprived rural authorities (those with the fewest LSOAs in the most deprived 10% nationally) have experienced cuts of no more than 5% in service spending, the largely rural counties of Cumbria and Durham, where 9.03% and 11.11% of LSOAs are in the most deprived 10% nationally, experienced a 23% and 31% reduction 2009/10 to 2016/17 respectively<sup>8</sup>. So too with the impact of cuts to benefits. Whilst 74.2% (n=46) of the least deprived rural local authorities in England lost less than £500 per year/per working age adult as a result of welfare reforms between 2010 and 2020, for example, in the largely rural area of Tendring the total financial loss per working age adult was £820 each year with Table 3 showing a more general pattern of higher losses in the most deprived areas across the urban-rural continuum.

<sup>8</sup> Given the difficulty of measuring rural deprivation (Milbourne 2016), we use the quartile rank of the percentage of LSOAs in most deprived 10% nationally (MHCLG 2015), which gives imperfect but useful measure that is sensitive to pockets of deprivation within rural local authorities

	Quartile rank of most deprived LSOAs in 2015	Number of Local Authorities	Min	Max	Lower Quartile	Mean	Median	Upper Quartile	St. Dev.
<b>Predominantly Rural</b>	2	8	581	817	618.00	676.00	663.00	724.00	80.378
	3	10	505	687	554.00	604.10	610.00	655.00	57.751
	4	72	337	752	416.00	472.07	461.00	529.00	88.273
<b>Predominantly Urban</b>	1	47	597	1220	746	814.98	805	885	116.941
	2	36	534	970	628.50	704.44	686.00	754.50	105.580
	3	29	480	960	589	649.1	645	683	105.675
	4	69	161	817	406	501.04	503	573	119.636
<b>Urban with Significant Rural</b>	1	3	738	838	772.5	794.33	807	822.5	51.189
	2	6	597	785	614.00	673.00	658.00	726.00	73.632
	3	11	497	740	558.50	604.91	597.00	645.50	73.387
	4	34	314	760	414.00	459.29	449.50	482.00	89.328

Table 3: Total impact of all welfare reforms (pre and post-2015) 2010 to 2020/21: Financial loss per working age adult £ per year, by Quartile Rank of Proportion of LSOAs in most deprived 10% nationally, Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015 (Data source: Beatty and Fothergill 2016)

Further, as Figure 2 shows, there is a moderate positive correlation between welfare reform and an increase in deprivation in the most deprived rural local authorities. For example, whilst the Largely Rural area of Tendring lost £820 per working age adult per year between 2010-2020, between 2015 and 2019 the percentage of its LSOAs in the 10% most deprived nationally increased from 15.7% to 18.0%. Similarly, the Mainly Rural area of East Lindsey saw a £760 per year decline in income from benefits between 2010 and 2020 and a 0.9% increase in the proportion of LSOAs in the most deprived 10% nationally (rising from 14.8% to 15.7%) between 2015 and 2019. Households in Swale,

Northumberland and the Forest of Dean saw annual losses of £680, £610 and £540 respectively 2010 to 2020, with the proportion of LSOAs in the most deprived nationally rising 2.35%, 4.57% and 2% respectively between 2015 and 2019.

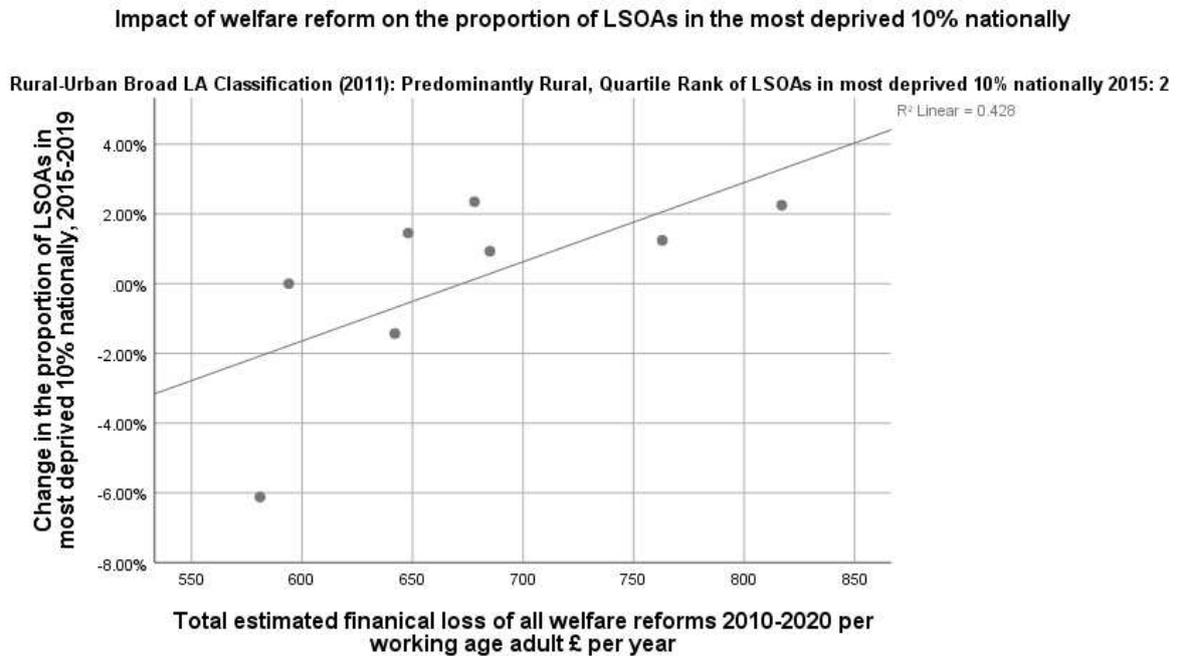


Figure 2: Impact of welfare reform on the proportion of LSOAs in the most deprived 10% nationally, for the most deprived rural local authorities in England

The picture in Wales is different. In Wales rural local authorities comprise 40.9% of the total number of local authorities nationally but accounted for 57.1% of local authorities which had service spending cuts of 15% or more; with four out of nine rural authorities seeing service spending reductions of 15% or higher. Rural Wales has also been disproportionately hit by welfare reform with just over half (55.6%) of rural local authorities in Wales recording an estimated loss of £700 or more per working age adult per year as a result of all welfare reforms 2010 to 2020/21, compared to one third of urban authorities. Valley Authorities, a classification unique to Wales and which comprise significant proportions of rural and urban areas at LSOAs and MLOA level (Bibby and Brindley 2013) have been the hardest hit; with Merthyr Tydfil, Blaenau Gwent, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Caerphilly suffering a loss of £750 per year or more.

In fact, in both England and Wales it is likely that several of the cuts to services associated with austerity will likely hit people living in rural areas especially hard, irrespective of the scale of cuts relative to urban areas, because of problems of service access peculiar to rural areas. For example,

480 bus routes across the UK have either been cut back or cut altogether since 2016, exacerbating transport problems in rural areas where public transport was already severely limited (Rural Coalition, 2017). The consolidation and closure of jobcentres has increased the costs and time taken to travel on a depleted and unreliable public transport network, increasing the risk of being sanctioned for missing a jobcentre interview (Finn, 2018; Tickle, 2019), and the 'digital by default' design of Universal Credit and other benefit claims is a significant problem for rural households with only limited internet access.

Austerity is also intensifying longstanding problems of relative service deprivation. For example, Unison's Freedom of Information request revealed that despite its youth services supporting 8,584 young people in 2010, Oxfordshire County Council had closed all 19 council run youth centres (and made 58 paid youth workers redundant) by 2014/15, and had closed 43 of its children centres and family hubs by 2018/19. Of the 605 libraries in England which have either closed or ceased to be operated by the council since 2010, 150 were in rural local authorities - with 120 closing altogether and only 30 (20%) turned over to volunteers. Though in predominantly urban local authorities 362 libraries were effected, 150 (41%) of these survived to be run by volunteers: suggesting the 'rural' is not quite the 'ideal laboratory' for community-run public services that it is made out to be by proponents of the 'Big Society'. Cuts to local authority spending have also hit voluntary welfare services, at a time when demand for such services is rising rapidly (Shucksmith, 2016). For example, between 2012 and 2017 68 Citizen Advice Bureaus across England closed (Parliament UK, 2017), with Citizen's Advice in Cornwall announcing plans to cut its budget by more than 50% as a result of the loss of £200,000 of funding from Cornwall County Council (ITV, 2017).

The spending power of some rural authorities has also recently been further reduced as they have sought to manage increasing service demands and dwindling budgets associated with austerity through a process of mergers designed to secure 'efficiency' savings. These mergers form part of a long line of attempts to 're-scale' the structures of rural local government each of which, as Pemberton and Goodwin (2010) have argued, have created new political groups, strategies and objects of governance. But they take on added significance in an age of austerity as new political leadership (Fuller 2016) and institutional architecture (Wills 2020) has the capacity either to mitigate or further entrench public spending cuts. While it is too early to consider the full impact of local government reorganisation on rural local politics and service provision, we wish to draw attention to the effects of these mergers on the spending power of both upper and lower tiers of local government.

For example, on 1 April 2019 Dorset Council (Unitary Authority) was established by combining East Dorset District Council, North Dorset District Council, Purbeck District Council, West Dorset District

Council and Weymouth & Portland District Council, and Dorset County Council. Between 2015/16 to 2018/19 each of the district councils had a reduction in their core spending power of 2.9%, 16.2%, 7.3%, 7.5%, 11.9%, respectively. In 2019-20 Dorset Council had a spending power of £307.6 million. Yet in 2018-2019 the combined spending power of what were to become its constituent authorities was £329.3 million, with the establishment of a unitary authority amounting to a loss of £21.7 million (-6.59%) in 2019-20 core spending power, or a reduction of £9.6 million (3.03%) on their core spending since 2015-16.

The reorganisation of rural local government at district level has resulted in similar losses. For example, in 2015/16 the combined spending power of Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury District Councils in Suffolk would have been £19.6 million. When merged to become West Suffolk District Council in 2019 the spending power of the new authority was just £19.6 million – a loss of £3.3 million, or 16.8%. Likewise, the establishment of East Suffolk District Council resulted in an 8.6% reduction in spending power (totalling £2.3 million), and of Somerset West and Taunton District Council of 1.7% (£300,000). While rescaling the rural state might be considered a pragmatic response to fiscal stress on local authorities (Wills 2020), from this analysis we would suggest new local government entities brought about through territorial restructuring in fact constitute a less visible form of ‘scalar dumping’ from national government (Kim 2019); shifting responsibility and blame for service cuts onto newly formed unitary and district authorities (Pemberton and Goodwin 2010; Harvey and Pickering 2010).

As local authorities draw on dwindling reserves to balance the books (NAO 2018) or invest in commercial property to generate revenue (NAO 2020), rural local authorities have also developed several distinctive strategies to try and ‘absorb’ the costs of austerity. Amongst these is the sharpest increase in the sale of county farms since Thatcher’s cuts to council spending in the 1980s (Graham et al 2019). For example, faced with a decline in revenue grant support from central government from £60m in 2011/12 to just £5.3m in 2018, Herefordshire County Council sold 89% (4,177 acres) of its county farms. Somerset have sold 2,897 acres (a 46% decline) North Yorkshire 1,312 acres (26% decline) Cheshire West & Chester 1,228 acres (30% decline) and Lincolnshire 1,176 acres (6% decline): leading Christophers (2018) to describe these sales of public land as nothing less than ‘the new enclosure’.

At a more prosaic level these strategies also include the transfer of public toilets, parks, and libraries to town and parish councils which can raise local taxation to pay for them – what Wills (2020) calls ‘institutional switching’. But such an approach is reliant on local people paying additional tax to retain the service. While this switching enabled Cornwall to save 29 of its 31 libraries from closure (Wills 2020), questions remain regarding the fairness of double taxation on low income households in a

county in which working age adults have lost on average £690 per year as a result of Welfare Reform 2010-2020 (Beatty and Fothergill 2016) and the number of people in receipt of Local Council Tax Support dropped 4.3% from 2014/15 to 2015/16, and a further 3% between 2017/18 and 2018/19 (MHCLG 2020).

Finally, several key aspects of welfare reform resulting from austerity — including those associated with the kind of sudden and dramatic drop in household income that leaves people reliant on a food bank - have hit some rural areas disproportionately hard. Most notably, government pressure on Jobcentre staff and DWP decision-makers to increase the number of sanctions made in 2012 intensified socially and spatially uneven practices in sanction regimes (Public and Commercial Services Union 2014; de Vries et al 2017). For example, whilst the distribution of sanction referrals in relation to Job Seeker Allowance (JSA) claimants is proportionate to the geography of claimants - with 78.3% of referrals coming from predominantly urban areas which make up 78.9% of total claimants – as Table 4 shows higher level sanctions (the loss of a person’s main or only source of income for 13, 26 or 156 weeks) made up a higher proportion of the total sanctions made in predominantly rural local authorities than they did in urban areas.

Indeed, despite comprising only 12.5% of total monthly claimants and 12.4% of total JSA sanction referrals made in England between November 2012 and October 2019, Predominantly Rural authorities accounted for 17.8% of all known high-level sanctions in that period. The rural counties of Purbeck, West Dorset and Sedgemoor issued 414, 756, and 2150 high level sanctions respectively in this period, amounting to 44.2%, 40.4% and 36.8% of total sanctions given in each local authority. Of the five areas that gave more high-level sanctions than low-level sanctions (Epsom and Ewell, Purbeck, Stratford-on-Avon, Teignbridge, West Dorset), all but one were Predominantly Rural local authorities. Just as a sanction system whose claim to ‘impartiality’ is based on strict, and apparently entirely impersonal, bureaucratic processes has in fact been shown to be anything but impersonal (de Vries et al 2017) it would seem this system is also imposing a disproportionate number of higher level sanctions on claimants in rural areas.

The disproportionate number of high-level sanctions in some rural areas is especially concerning given the increasingly uneven geography of Local Welfare Assistance Schemes (LWAS) emerging since the disbandment of the Social Fund (from which people may previously have been able to receive an emergency grant when facing a crisis such as the sudden loss of income) and its replacement by discretionary LWASs in 2013. Since the disbandment of the Social Fund at least 28 authorities across England have closed their LWA schemes entirely, with others reducing expenditure by an average of 72.5% (United Nations 2018). But using the most comprehensive data available on changes to LWASs

between 2013/14 to 2017/18 (Aitchison 2018) it becomes evident that rural authorities are far more likely than their urban counterparts to have closed their schemes: with just under one in three (9 of 28) having done so, compared to one in seven urban authorities (16 of 116). Further, of the 138 local authorities which gave information on real term changes to LWAS spending 45.8% of Predominantly Rural authorities reported a 90-100% cut in funding for their schemes, compared with 35.2% of Urban with Significant Rural areas, and 22.6% of Predominantly Urban authorities.

		Number of Local Authorities	Min	Max	Lower quartile	Mean	Median	Upper quartile	Std. Dev
<b>Predominantly Rural</b>	Referral Rate	91	5.20%	14.05%	6.59%	7.92%	7.78%	8.89%	1.78%
	Sanction Rate	91	2.24%	6.59%	3.08%	3.68%	3.49%	4.03%	0.91%
	High level sanction rate	91	8.90%	44.42%	18.08%	22.84%	22.45%	27.09%	7.48%
<b>Predominantly Urban</b>	Referral Rate	181	3.79%	14.61%	6.49%	7.97%	7.72%	9.13%	2.03%
	Sanction Rate	181	1.79%	6.47%	3.05%	3.69%	3.63%	4.19%	0.94%
	High level sanction rate	181	5.51%	40.51%	10.37%	15.57%	13.48%	18.59%	7.29%
<b>Urban with Significant Rural</b>	Referral Rate	54	5.42%	14.04%	6.76%	8.30%	7.98%	9.47%	1.95%
	Sanction Rate	54	2.16%	6.49%	3.10%	3.75%	3.63%	4.18%	0.96%
	High level sanction rate	54	8.10%	37.97%	15.12%	20.16%	19.78%	24.32%	7.14%

Table 4: JSA sanction and referral rate November 2012 to October 2019 by rurality (Data source: DWP Stat-Xplore 2020, ONS NOMIS 2020)

The higher than average number of high-level sanctions found in rural areas together with the very high number of rural authorities which have closed or seriously restricted their LWASs puts households in some rural areas at disproportionate risk of destitution. In the absence of any government measures of food insecurity, and with estimates available only at an aggregate level for Britain as a whole (Taylor and Loopstra 2016), it is difficult to establish to what extent this risk is shaping experiences of food insecurity in rural England and Wales. But some indication of food insecurity in rural areas can be garnered from studies of specific sectors of the British rural economy, with the Food Research Collaboration reporting 25% of all UK farmers in 2014 to be living in poverty, for example, and the food production industries paying such low wages that many workers cannot afford to eat the food they pick or pack (FRC 2014). According to Corfe (2018) 26% of rural areas in the UK can be classified as 'food deserts' compared to 17% of urban areas, with individuals with restricted mobility (whether because of age, physical ability or cost) facing additional difficulties accessing affordable food stores. Submissions to the 2014 *All Party Parliamentary Inquiry in to Hunger and Food Poverty in Britain* also provide a picture of food insecurity in different places, and the problems driving it. For example, submissions from Derbyshire (in the north of England) and the Cotswolds (in the South) noted that:

*Derbyshire's rural nature presents a range of food challenges. Residents often live some miles away from cheap supermarkets and may not be able to afford the bus fare to travel into major towns to shop. Food choices are limited (particularly access to fresh fruit and vegetables) and considerably more expensive ... In some of our communities in Derbyshire it costs £6 for the bus fare to get to the nearest Tesco. Access to budget supermarkets like Aldi or Lidl is almost non-existent due to distance and cost of travelling (APPG 2014:4)*

*Everything costs more in the rural areas, services, fuel, bus fares and goods. The nearest Tesco store is one of their 'premium' stores so not much help for those who would benefit from some economy ranges of products. Local shops seem to have a 'mark-up' on goods compared to those in the bigger branches in Cheltenham (APPG 2014:4)*

### **3. The geographies of rural food banking**

An understanding of rural austerity is foundational to an understanding of rural food banking. Often unseen impacts of austerity underlie the amalgam of low wages, problematic and stingy benefit systems and penalties, declining levels of public services and economic hardship amongst the elderly, the unemployed and the underemployed. Food banks in rural areas are therefore understood as a direct response to austerity and indeed a visible signal of the effects of austerity that are often either

out of sight and out of mind, or deliberately politicked away in discourses that find it impossible to imagine hardship in supposedly affluent and bucolic rural settings.

In addition, food banks carry the marks of austerity in a number of different ways. In some ways they transfer the logic of austerity into the everyday lives of rural people as food charity becomes a substitute for denuded welfare provision. Yet foodbanks sit uneasily in the bucolic idyllic landscape and cannot simply be pigeon-holed in rural discourses of self-help and poverty-denial. Indeed, they open up questions about austerity-induced poverty and insecurity which cannot be passed off as an urban phenomenon. However, food bank usage takes a peculiarly rural form due to the clash between not wishing to expose impoverishment in highly visible rural communities, and having to "surface" in local centres where "knowing and being known" is more of a danger than in urban settings. So food banks are sites not only where there is a significant charitable response to austerity-hardship, but also where usage is problematised - and users are stigmatised - by socio-cultural and political conventions about orthodox rural life and their configuration of what needs exist and how they should be met.

Previous attempts to map the distribution of the UK's food banks have been hampered by incomplete data; mapping the location only of the Trussell Trust's 423 main food banks, rather than the 'food distribution centres' attached to them or food banks operating independently of the Trust (see, for example, Loopstra et al 2015; Smith et al 2018). The distinction between a Trussell Trust 'foodbank' and 'distribution centre' is administrative rather than real, with both providing food (via a referral system) to those in need. But the locations of the Trust's 959 distribution centres have only recently been released on its 'Find a Foodbank' search engine. Using a combination of web searches, telephone surveys, and snowballing, the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) has also recently identified 751 independent food banks (Goodwin 2018), bringing the total number of food banks/centres operating in the UK in May 2018 to 2,133 (rather than the 423 located in previous studies). Of these, 1,499 were operating in England, with almost a quarter (355, or 23.6%) in areas classified as Largely or Mainly Rural by the ONS, and 139 in Wales – with almost a quarter of these (23.7%) also in rural areas.

Echoing the variegated geographies of austerity and rural poverty outlined above, both the number of food banks and relative density of provision (the number of people per food bank) varies very significantly geographically (see Table 5). For example, the number of food banks ranges from 25 in rural Cornwall and 21 in rural Devon, to 15 in rural Cambridgeshire, and just 7 in rural Herefordshire. By contrast, whilst Cambridgeshire has one of the highest densities of provision (with one food bank for every 19,000 people), Devon has one of the lowest – with one food bank per 45,303 people. Sitting at polar ends of each distribution are the very high number of food banks, and very high density of

provision, in the post-industrial iron, coal and steel communities of rural County Durham, and the very low number of food banks, and very low density of provision, in rural Cumbria.

<b>Ranked number of food banks in Mainly or Largely Rural Areas by selected counties</b>		<b>Ranked density of food banks (number of people per food bank in both urban and rural areas of each county) by selected counties</b>	
<b>County</b>	<b>Number of rural food banks</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>Population per food bank</b>
County Durham	28	County Durham	1724
Cornwall	25	Herefordshire	7971
Devon	21	Shropshire	12244
Wiltshire	17	Leicestershire	19049
Leicestershire	16	Cambridgeshire	19412
Northumberland	16	Northumberland	19751
Cambridgeshire	15	East Sussex	20288
Somerset	13	Warwickshire	20323
Gloucestershire	12	Cornwall	21440
Suffolk	12	Nottinghamshire	23111
Shropshire	11	Derbyshire	23351
Derbyshire	9	Isle of Wight	23416
Lincolnshire	9	Wiltshire	24290

Norfolk	9	Lincolnshire	24608
West Sussex	9	Somerset	25236
Dorset	9	Dorset	25656
East Ridings	9	Buckinghamshire	26003
Hampshire	7	East Ridings	30379
Warwickshire	7	West Sussex	39663
Oxfordshire	7	Hampshire	40103
Worcestershire	7	Gloucestershire	40871
Herefordshire	7	Norfolk	40923
Nottinghamshire	6	Oxfordshire	42700
East Sussex	6	Devon	45303
Isle of Wight	6	Worcestershire	51469
Cumbria	6	Suffolk	56153
Buckinghamshire	4	Cumbria	62025

Table 5: Number of food banks and food bank density by selected counties

Sources: Trussell Trust (2018a) Trussell Trust Find a Foodbank (<https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/find-a-foodbank/>); Goodwin (2018) Independent food banks in England and Wales (<http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/mapping>); DEFRA (2016) ONS Rural-Urban Classification of Local Authorities (2011); ONS (2017a) Population Estimates for UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, Mid-2016.

In Wales the distribution of food banks broadly follows the distribution of population, with very few food banks in the predominantly rural areas of Mid and North West Wales, and much higher numbers in the more densely populated South East - where the seven local authority areas that together make up the South Wales Valleys stand out in terms of both the scale and density of provision.

Using LSOA data, however, a more nuanced geography emerges with 23.7% of the country's food banks in areas classified as rural at the LSOA scale including a number in the smaller towns and villages scattered across the Valleys (Table 6).

Not-with-standing this spatial variation, people in need of emergency food, and rural food banks themselves, face several common problems. First, just as rising fuel costs and limited public transport makes it difficult for poorer households in sparsely populated areas to access the more affordable food available in supermarkets (which tend to cluster in larger towns and cities), those same households may find it very difficult to access either a referral agency or food bank, both of which also tend to cluster in larger settlements. In response to these challenges, rural food banks often operate in different ways to their urban counterparts. In Cambridgeshire, for example, a central food bank in Ely co-ordinates the work of six other food centres in outlying towns and villages each of which opens on a different day of the week to maximise access across the network, though limited opening times mean that people can still find themselves having to travel very long distances if needing to access food immediately. Because of the transport costs involved in collecting a parcel, some food banks have increased the size of food parcels they offer so people need to travel less frequently; others have begun to supply a range of other, more easily accessible, welfare providers – for example, GP surgeries - with a limited number of food parcels to distribute directly; and a few have even begun to operate delivery services. Though improving access for clients, each of these responses adds to the costs of providing food, and to the logistical demands placed on food bank volunteers; with delivery services especially expensive and time consuming for volunteer drivers.

Second, the uneven distribution of retailers and services in rural areas also poses problems for food banks in more remote areas, many of which struggle to secure sufficient donations to meet demand because people tend to donate to the larger supermarkets at which they do their main shop, or in the larger towns and cities in which they work. As one volunteer told Butler (2013, unpaginated), this uneven geography can lead to the frustrating situation in which 'people from isolated rural villages are driving to a nearby town to donate food to a food bank, unaware that there are people in their village who are in need and unable to get to the food bank'. Third, cuts to local authority spending have resulted in a reduction in the number of the agencies that typically provide referrals to food banks. For example, in interview, James Milton, former South West Regional Development officer for the Trussell Trust, explained how 'the restructuring and reduction of [local] Children's Centre services appears to have led to a very substantial drop in referrals to a foodbank distribution centre' in South West England (2014).

		<b>Total Number of Food Banks</b>	<b>Number of Rural Food Banks</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Density of food banks (number of people per food bank)</b>	
<b>Region</b>	<b>Local Authority</b>					
<b>South East</b>	Bridgend	10	4	143,200	14,320	
	Rhonda Cynon Taff	13	4	238,300	18,330	
	Vale of Glamorgan	6	0	128,500	21,416	
	Merthyr Tydfil	10	1	59,800	5,980	
	Blaenau Gwent	6	1	69,600	11,600	
	Caerphilly	4	1	180,500	45,125	
	Cardiff	7	0	361,500	51,642	
	Torfaen	8	2	92,100	11,512	
	Newport	9	0	149,100	15,566	
	Monmouthshire	5	0	92,800	18,560	
	<b>South West</b>	Carmarthenshire	4	0	185,600	46,400
		Pembrokeshire	8	5	124,000	15,500
Swansea		8	0	244,500	30,562	
Neath Port Talbot		7	2	141,600	20,228	
<b>Mid Wales</b>	Ceredigion	2	1	74,100	37,050	
	Powys	5	5	132,200	26,440	
<b>North West</b>	Isle of Anglesey	3	1	69,700	23,223	
	Gwynedd	4	3	123,600	30,900	
	Conwy	2	0	116,500	58,250	
<b>North East</b>	Flintshire	8	1	154,400	19,300	
	Wrexham	5	0	136,700	27,340	
	Denbighshire	5	2	94,800	18,960	
<b>Total</b>		<b>106</b>	<b>33</b>			

Table 6: Total number and number of rural food banks and density of provision by region and local authority in Wales as of May 2018

Sources: Trussell Trust (2018a) Trussell Trust Find a Foodbank (<https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/find-a-foodbank/>); Goodwin (2018) Independent food banks in England and Wales (<http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/mapping>); Stats Wales (2014) Geography lookups – match LSOA to different geography groups; ONS (2017a) Population Estimates for UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, Mid-2016.

Such difficulties are common to many rural food banks. But as we suggested above the geography of rural food banking is also highly variegated. For example, differences in the number of food banks and the density of provision means that access to food aid is much more limited in some areas than in others. In contrast to Cambridgeshire's 32 food banks, Cumbria has just eight with the result that people in need can face very long journeys (29 miles in the case of residents of Workington to reach their nearest food bank in Carlisle, for example). Further, though volunteers in some areas have sought to improve access by developing local networks and co-ordinating opening hours across a group of satellite distribution centres, the potential for such networking is also uneven. The satellite model is much more developed amongst Trussell Trust food banks, many of which developed out of existing inter-denominational church networks and which have subsequently been able draw upon a centrally administered electronic forum and website and the help of paid regional co-ordinators, than it is amongst independent food banks; the majority of which are provided by single organisations. Hence differences in the regional distribution of different food aid organisations may translate into differences in the potential to develop local networks, and hence differences in the potential of those in need to access services, in different parts of the country. With regards this organisational spread, in Cambridgeshire 31 of its 32 food banks are affiliated with the Trussell Trust, in Dorset only 3 of 18. In Wales, there are both independent and Trussell Trust food banks in fourteen of the country's twenty-two local authorities, but no independent food banks at all in eight of the country's twenty local authority areas.

Such networks also enable individual food banks to ease some of the problems of supply associated with rural food banking, by pooling donations and sharing supplies when another member of the network runs low. But again, whilst there are certainly examples of this sharing of resources across different organisations (with independent and Trussell Trust food banks in Cumbria, for example, having a strong history of collaboration) it is again more common within local networks of Trussell Trust food banks than it is between independent food banks, or between independent and Trussell Trust food banks. Indeed, rather than cooperating, a number of independent food banks have complained they have found it difficult to develop relationships with local supermarkets because of

national level agreements between the Trussell Trust and supermarkets *Asda* and *Tesco* and efforts by Trussell Trust food banks to monopolise local retailers (May et al 2020).

Finally, access to food is shaped by the operational procedures developed by different food bank organisations. Food banks affiliated to the Trussell Trust operate a common set of policies and procedures, with people in need only able to collect food having been referred to the food bank by a local 'welfare professional', expected not to visit the food bank on more than three occasions in any six-month period, and provided with three days of food on each occasion. Independent food banks operate a variety of practices, with 40% allowing clients to come to their food bank without a referral, 44% imposing no restrictions on the number of times people can come, and 45% providing food parcels that contain more than three days' worth of food (Loopstra et al 2019). Irrespective of the number of food banks in a place, whether a person may access food is in practice therefore largely dependent upon the procedures at their nearest food bank, with the organisational geographies of food aid at the local and regional levels producing something of a postcode lottery when it comes to a person's ability to gain the help they need (May et al 2018).

Issues of rationing and referral clearly connect with questions concerning the aims and ethos of different food aid organisations, and the ethical practices of individual food bank volunteers. As we suggested above, these will very likely shape a distinctive geography of access to emergency food aid. But these geographies also intersect with very different but equally important variations in local cultures of poverty and of charitable welfare provision (Cloke et al 2007) that also shape the propensity for and form of food aid that emerges in different places, the likelihood of those in need turning to food banks, and the experiences of those using food banks in those places. In the final two parts of the paper we explore these local cultures of food aid in more detail, contrasting the experience of food aid providers and recipients in the rural South West of England and in the South Wales Valleys.

#### **4. Local cultures of food banking: The rural idyll and poverty denial**

*'We had to close the food bank because there were too many barriers ... people didn't want to go there ... People didn't want to be identified. The space was too public and ... there [was] too much local prejudice'. (Manager of former food bank, South West England)*

With its rolling green hills and chocolate box villages the mainly rural South-West region of England (made up of the counties of Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall) is many peoples' vision of the quintessential rural idyll. But, whilst many parts of the region are indeed beautiful and do not suffer widespread deprivation, its economy is relatively weak; leading it to struggle with the recent recession and making it particularly vulnerable to the public-sector cuts brought about by austerity (CLES 2014). As with other areas facing problems of rural poverty, though unemployment is lower than the national average the region has high levels of part-time employment and of self-employment and 'flexible' working; resulting in lower than standard median weekly wages (£485 a week, compared to £520 nationally in 2014), but also very low numbers of residents claiming either in or out of work benefits (CLES 2014). A reliance on the public sector— accounting for a fifth (19.1%) of employment - also left the region facing significant job losses as a result of the cuts brought about by austerity, with the loss of 78,000 public sector jobs between 2010 and 2014 (the second highest of any English region, after the North West) (CLES 2014). County and District Council budgets have been slashed, with Devon County Council required to cut a third of its budget (£200 million) between 2009 and 2017 (CLES 2014). And, whilst rural communities in the South-West face the same premiums on food, domestic energy, and fuel, as rural communities elsewhere, as England's largest but least densely populated region many communities have been especially hard hit by recent reductions in the subsidies paid by local authorities to support local bus services (with cuts of 75% by Torbay Council (South Devon), 33% by Somerset County Council, and 21% by Devon County Council (CLES 2014).

As elsewhere, the geographies of poverty in South-West England are highly variegated. Figure 3 reveals this variegation in Devon and Cornwall. In Cornwall 37 of 73 (50.7%) MSOAs have 20% or more of households living in poverty (with incomes below 60% median income after housing costs). Though a higher proportion of these MSOAs are in urban areas - with the highest proportions of poor households found in urban Penzance East (33%) and the lowest in the picturesque rural area of Saltash Latchbrook and St Stephens (12.9%) - in rural Cornwall 18 (40.9%) MSOAs have 20% or more of households living below the poverty line. Similarly, several towns in rural Devon have relatively high proportions of households experiencing poverty, including Torrington (23.2%), Totnes (22.5%), and Okehampton South (21.5%). In South Hams, picture postcard views conceal the inequality between the wealth in the more built up areas of Ivybridge West (12.1%) and Woolwell (14.2%) in the north of the district, and the poverty in the rural towns and villages of Totnes (22.5%), Dartmouth & East Dart (21.2%) and Kingsbridge (20.2%) in the south.

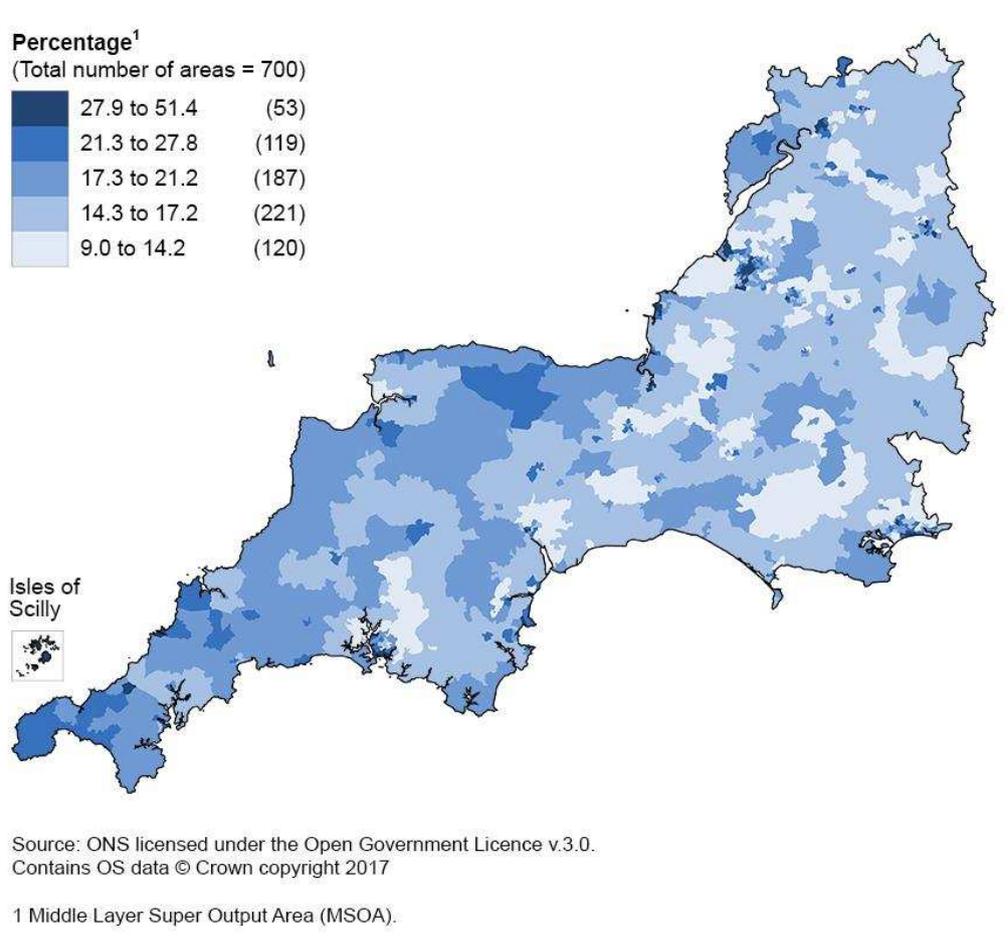


Figure 3: Percentage of households in poverty after housing costs by middle layer super output area, South West England, Financial year ending 2014. Source: Office for National Statistics licensed under the Open Government Licence v.3.0. Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright 2017 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/smallareamodelbasedhouseholdsinpovertyestimatesenglandandwales/latest#links-to-related-statistics>

Against this background, both Devon and Cornwall have seen a rapid rise in the number of food banks. The Trussell Trust opened its first food bank in Devon in 2008. By June 2018 the county had 26 Trussell Trust and independent food banks in total; Cornwall 29. In Devon, food banks have spread across the southern, central and northern parts of the county, but limited opening hours coupled with the county's size and low population densities mean that for many households reaching a referral agency or food bank can be very difficult. For residents of Winkleigh in Mid Devon, for example, there are

only three food banks within a twelve-mile radius. Access is difficult even on the more densely populated south coast, and can be made more difficult by the voucher and referral systems many food banks utilise (see May et al 2019):

*\*\*\*\* entered, notably distressed, and recounted the journey he had made this morning. He explained that after having been rejected from \*\*\*\* food bank (because his voucher was invalid), he and his friend were advised to make the twenty-six-mile journey to a food bank in \*\*\*\*, via bus. \*\*\*\* and his friend queued for a food parcel, but were rejected for a second time by the food bank as they had run out of food – finally, being sent back to \*\*\*\* [their original port of call] to ask if they could supply any sort of parcel. (Fieldnotes)*

Yet perhaps because lacking the common ‘signatures’ of deprivation, many of the problems of poverty and food insecurity in Devon remain invisible to both visitors and residents alike as this manager of a food bank in one of Devon’s coastal communities explained:

*[People say things like] like, “Well, there’s no poverty here. If there was poverty, the government would deal with it .... But it’s not so. There are huge pockets of deprivation down in this part of the town. (Food Bank (FB) Manager, Coastal Community 1, Devon)*

Shaped by longstanding constructions of coastal Devon as a therapeutic place and a centre for middle class tourists and retirees (Smith 2002), in these communities the reluctance to ‘see’ problems of poverty and food insecurity was sometimes related to a reluctance to mar the community (and local economy) with so obvious a marker of need, and sometimes because (wealthier) residents had clearly internalised familiar constructions of deservedness, dependency, and food insecurity as a ‘lifestyle choice’. In either case the result is that some organisations in these communities had found it very difficult to raise the necessary support to establish food aid projects:

*‘We had, it was a fairly prominent Rotarian came up to me ... and said: “This food bank of yours has made it very, very easy for a lot of people. You feed them, and they can then spend their benefit money on drugs and alcohol. Well done’ (FB Manager, Coastal Community 1, Devon)*

*[The attitude was very much] “\*\*\*\*doesn’t want to have a foodbank. Why are you coming to us?’ In fact, somebody said to me: ‘If you need a foodbank, you shouldn’t be in \*\*\*\*’ (FB Manager, Coastal Community 2, Devon)*

By contrast, in the food bank serving the inland farming communities that provided another case study, the difficulty organisers faced had less to do with any explicit hostility to the idea of a food bank than with convincing people of the need for one. Here, the same deep-rooted belief in rural self-sufficiency and community resilience that may also explain the higher than usual levels of self-employment and lower than usual rates of benefit uptake found in the region articulated itself in a reluctance amongst people who were struggling to admit to their struggles, a difficulty amongst others to recognise need could exist in such a space, and difficulties for both in accepting 'outside help':

*[The attitude round here seems to be that] "We're fine, we've all got food". Farmers [in particular] are very proud; "We don't want food bank vouchers"'. (Referral Agent 1, South West England)*

Not surprisingly, and even if for somewhat different reasons, people in both places were often very reluctant to use food banks. Though clearly not restricted to rural areas (Douglas et al 2015), the shame in using food banks does seem to be exacerbated in (apparently) wealthy rural communities where any sign of poverty is both highly transgressive and highly visible, and in farming communities where the inability to feed one's self or one's family contravenes local cultures of self-sufficiency and resilience, and indeed the very idea of such communities themselves as places of food production rather than food poverty. As a referral agent told us:

*'We tend to visit farms and ... you realise they haven't got any food. Now because I'm a signatory I can authorise them to collect food packages. Nine times out of ten the farmer will not want to do it. ... People won't come in to get [the food] because ... that ... pride ... "Hang on, we've always fed ourselves ... we've always managed." (Referral Agent 1, South West England)*

The limited number and dispersed nature of referral agencies also limited access, as the same referral agent told us: *'you could be two doors down from the local food bank and you wouldn't know about it, or you wouldn't find a way to tap into that, because there's not that referral [network]'*.

When people did turn to a food bank, they were similarly concerned that other people in the community might find out they had done so. As one respondent succinctly put it: *'[If I go to a food bank] I don't want to be served by my daughter's teacher'*. Despite the distances and costs involved one way in which people sought to avoid such encounters was therefore to travel even further (sometimes walking) to a food bank in another village where they would not be known. As one volunteer explained:

*'It's common for people from \*\*\*\*, because it is so small and everyone knows everyone, they come to \*\*\*\* [16 miles away] to avoid the stigma – people don't know them here.'* (FB Manager, Coastal Community 2, Devon)

The stigma and exclusions produced by these local cultures of poverty denial and self-sufficiency also sometimes bled into the spaces of the food bank. Though there was no suggestion that people's interactions with food bank volunteers themselves were framed by these kinds of discourses, one food bank manager recalled the problems that emerged when their project shared a premises with another charity, whose mostly older clientele and volunteers often conveyed a clear sense of their disdain for the failure of the food bank's clients to live up to these stereotypical ideals of emotional as well as material resilience:

*'We had a lot of problems with the older people from \*\*\*\*\* who don't believe our clients stories, don't show any understanding – "buck up' and you'll be fine like we did.'* (FB Manager, Coastal Community 1, Devon)

Indeed, in some communities' reactions to both food banks and food bank clients were sometimes openly hostile. For example, a food bank manager in the next town along the coast from our case study eventually resigned because unable to deal with the hate mail he had received from local residents complaining about *'foodbank feeding scroungers'*, whilst one of our respondents explained how local opposition and the stigma and abuse suffered by the clients of a second project they had run was so bad he eventually took the decision to close it altogether - since when they have been trying to provide a delivery service, putting together food parcels in their main food bank and driving them 16 miles to the previous site and surrounding villages.

## **5. Local Geographies of Food Banking: Mutuality and disciplining the poor in the South Wales Valleys**

*Many parts of the UK have suffered from the decline of heavy industry, but the Welsh valleys are a grim emblem of the despair that lack of work can create ... From the window of the bus snaking up the valley road, one is struck by how the rich joyous beauty of the landscape contrasts with the poverty and melancholy of the people who scratch out a living in these parts.* (Mark Easton, BBC 25 June 2013)

In stark contrast to the picturesque South-West of England, a long history of industrial decline and high levels of unemployment have left the South Wales Valleys profoundly scarred, as is evident in the stigmatising language of the BBC broadcast quoted above, for example. But the Valleys are also associated with a proud history of collective social action. This history is most obviously captured in

the figure of the 'Father of the NHS' Nye Bevan who was born in the Valley community of Tredegar, and the values of collectivism and mutual aid that shaped Bevan's political life live on in the Valleys. For Bevan, these values were rooted in a particular mixture of socialism and religious non-conformism, and this mix also lives on – as this manager from one of the areas' food banks explained:

*"I believe that socialist values [are] Christian values. I believe that everybody is equal, and we all deserve a small portion of whatever is available. And if we can share so that everybody has got something, then that's better than some having nothing."* (Manager, FB 1, South Wales)

In this final part of the paper we explore some of the more mutualistic, but also ambiguous, ways in which these values are shaping a landscape of food aid in the Valleys.

That the first Trussell Trust food bank to open in Wales, opened in the Valleys (in Ebbw Vales in 2008) is hardly surprising. The Valley towns have long been amongst the UK's poorest communities. In 2014, 28% of the region's households had incomes below 60% of median national income (after housing costs) – compared to an average of 21.5% across the other Welsh authorities – ranging from a low of 20.7% of households in Bridgend to a high of 30.2% in Blaenau Gwent (ONS 2017a) where eight of the authority's nine MSOAs are in the highest poverty quintile for England and Wales (ONS 2017b). In part, household poverty levels relate to problems of low pay, with more than 30% of workers in Blaenau Gwent paid less than the voluntary Living Wage (Pearce et al 2018). But they are more obviously a product of long-standing problems of unemployment reaching back to the closures of the region's coal mines in the mid-'80s and '90s. Whilst the Valleys as a whole has a claimant rate of 20.4% (compared to 16.7% for Wales) (Beatty and Fothergill, 2014), Blaenau Gwent, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath Port Talbot, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Caerphilly all feature in the 20 authorities with the highest claimant rates in Britain, with Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Tydfil suffering the highest rates of any in the UK (Beatty and Fothergill 2011).

The region's history of heavy industry has also left very large numbers of people struggling with problems of ill health and disability. As a result, with public spending cuts falling disproportionately on welfare benefits and with especially deep cuts to incapacity and disability benefits, the Valleys have been especially hard hit by the programme of welfare reform unleashed under austerity. Beatty and Fothergill (2016) estimate changes to welfare benefits 2010-2020 have resulted in the total loss of £314 million a year to the Valley communities (an average of £753 a year per working age adult) with the worst affected communities in Rhondda Cynon Taff and Merthyr Tydfil losing £810 and £820 a year per working age adult.

The uneven geography of welfare reform provides an obvious explanation for the rise in levels of food insecurity in the Valleys over recent years. But that this rise has resulted in such a strong community response suggests a very different culture of charity is operating in the Valleys than in the South-West of England. Most obviously, whilst food banks in Devon struggled with powerful local cultures of rural self-sufficiency and poverty denial, in the Valleys the same traditions of social solidarity, collectivism and mutual aid described by the food bank manager above are shared by the wider community. Thus, despite – or indeed perhaps because of – the widespread deprivation that characterise these communities, food banks enjoy strong local support, including often very generous donations from those who may be least able to afford them. As this food bank manager explained:

*Other food banks in more affluent areas ... they have that abundance. And we don't have that. So, we do run very close to the "we've just got beans, pasta and cereal left over." But ... our donors are very, very generous. You know, they will give us half of everything they have.*  
(Manager, FB 1, South Wales)

This sense of solidarity extended to relationships between different food banks. For example, despite coming under pressure from Trussell Trust head office to establish an exclusive relationship with supermarkets in the area, the manager quoted above had resisted these calls and established agreements with the supermarkets and an independent food bank to share access to donations. As he said:

*We are both food banks, we are both doing the same thing. And it's one of the things that we kind of believe quite fundamentally. In the valley ... we don't have an abundance of resources, so we have to divide equally what we have.*

This orientation to working class mutualism, redistribution and social action in the Valleys was widely shared with the food bank emerging as a key site of community resilience (Blake 2019). The respondent below, for example, had come to volunteer at the food bank after his sister was referred there by a social worker. For him, volunteering was driven by a mixture of gratitude to the food bank volunteers for helping his sister, his own desire to 'do something with his life', and a belief that the best response to the anger he felt about what austerity was doing to him and others in his community was to contribute directly to local efforts to mitigate those effects:

*My sister ... isn't in work at the moment ... But a social worker sent her to the food bank. She came over here, had some food, was grateful. And I just thought, 'well, I'm not at work at the moment, I'd like to get involved' ... I want to do something with my life. I don't want to just sit*

*on my bum, watch telly and get angrier and angrier at what was going on. So, I thought, I can do something, so I came over and volunteered. (Volunteer, FB 2, South Wales)*

But this mutualism also sometimes held within it a powerful and oppressive moralism; most notably, a strong belief in the need to inculcate a sense of personal responsibility amongst others. Describing her visits to local schools to raise awareness of the food bank, for example, a deputy manager recounted how she seeks to challenge what she sees as a culture of fatalism and hopelessness in the Valleys:

*[I] explain to [the students] ... it's not a life choice ... just because your dad or your grandad was a miner and lost his job, and then your dad chose to stay here and not find employment doesn't mean that's your choice ... You know, and they're like, "There is no employment." And I'm like, "Okay, how many jobs have you actually applied for this week?" [we need to] change that 1000 yard stare, that this is my lot just standing on a street corner doing nothing. (Deputy Manager, FB 1, South Wales)*

All but one of the 58 food banks in the Valleys are affiliated with the Trussell Trust and for a number of the managers and volunteers we talked with one of the appeals of the Trust was the emphasis they placed on, and the tools they provided to challenge, 'welfare dependency':

*We always say to people: "you can only use this three times in six months. If you choose to use it when you don't need to that's your choice" ... Trying to get people into this sort of, you know - I'm always looking and assessing all of the people that come to us and ... when people start showing dependency, we will sort of – "that's enough" – because that's not what we're here for. (Deputy Manager, FB1, South Wales)*

In another food bank, the manager had sought other ways to instil a sense of self-responsibility and a 'work ethic' in claimants, signing up to a scheme run by the local Job Centre in which claimants were invited to take up a 'voluntary' position at the food bank in order to develop skills relevant to the workplace, but with those who declined subject to sanctioning (for examples of this practice in other South Wales food banks see Strong 2020). Expanding on their discussion of dependency, the deputy manager quoted above also explained how she drew on the help of the wider community to identify anyone 'abusing' the system – enabling her to classify and demarcate 'deserving' and 'undeserving' claimants (on the more widespread dissemination of processes of community 'souveillance' see Manji 2017):

*This is a small village. Everybody knows everything. Okay? Let's not mince our words, you know. I think at first, yes [some people did take advantage of the food bank]. Less so now, because the word has got out that ... it's not something you can have all the time, that you have to be assessed and all this kind of stuff. I always know who I've been ripped off by ... because it gets around.*

(Deputy Manager, FB 1, South Wales)

Yet such attitudes should not be understood as coming from a simple internalisation of the anti-welfare rhetoric of right-wing politicians and of 'poverty porn' (Jensen, 2014). Rather, in the Valleys at least, it seems to stem from an ambivalent mix of historic mutualism, an especially moralistic strain of protestant non-conformism, communal trauma and decades of territorial stigmatisation (Catterall 2016; Thomas 2016; Wacquant et al 2014; Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012). Within this potent mix some people have developed practices steeped in what Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) call 'scroungerphobia', managing their own identity and possible stigma by distancing themselves from more obviously stigmatised others – the 'welfare dependent' and the 'fraud', categories that, not coincidentally perhaps, structure the organisational principles of the Trussell Trust (May et al 2019) and have been central to other anti-poverty initiatives (notably the Welsh Government's flagship anti-poverty programme *Communities First*).

In the communities of rural Devon food insecurity carries with it a powerful stigma because transgressing traditional constructions of the rural idyll and local discourses of community resilience and poverty denial. In the Valleys of South Wales, stigma is not attached to poverty itself so much as to markers of deservedness. Food bank managers and volunteers can draw on the assistance of the wider community and on deeply rooted values of collectivism and mutual aid in their efforts to provide vital assistance to people in need. But as some of those same managers and volunteers also call on the community to help police the 'undeserving poor', it may be that the social solidarity with which the South Wales Valleys have also long been associated may not survive the onslaught of austerity.

## **Conclusions**

Building on the findings reported here we would point to at least five possible avenues for future research on the geographies of austerity and food banking in rural areas. First, this paper has provided new evidence that in rural areas of England and Wales austerity has disproportionately impacted low income households: both through nationwide but spatially variable cuts to benefit payments, and through the political decision by some rural local authorities to cut local welfare provision. The paper

has also shown how the steady dismantling of social infrastructures resulting from austerity (Shaw 2019) - bus routes, libraries, youth centres – is compounding problems of relative transport and service deprivation and of the poverty premium associated with rural areas. These issues take on additional significance in-light of the ongoing ‘Fair Funding Review’ in the UK. In response to charges that under the current formula rural areas lose out on central government revenue grant funding because the formula does not reflect the additional costs of providing services in sparsely populated areas (County Council Network 2019) the proposal is to remove the weighting previously placed on deprivation and distribute funding according to population, with an additional weighting to compensate for the additional costs of service provision accruing to rural authorities. Given the likely distribution of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ (with 50 of 66 Labour councils in urban authorities set to see a reduction in central government funding, and 37 of 46 Conservative controlled rural authorities set to gain funding) it is hard not to see the review as a political manoeuvre to protect financially struggling councils in Tory Heartlands (Butler 2019; Toynbee 2020). The problem with such an analysis is that it risks ignoring the needs of both poorer rural areas and poorer households in what may at an aggregate level appear relatively wealthy rural authorities (Milbourne 2004). Rather than reject the new weightings in their entirety we would therefore advocate for revisions that recognise the additional costs associated with rural service provision but retain the existing weighting on deprivation.

Second, from the evidence presented here, food insecurity bears many of the hallmarks of other forms of rural social exclusion. Whilst the broader cultural politics of the rural idyll will often render social problems ‘out of sight and out of mind’ (Clope et al 2000a), they may also make such problems more visible, heightening the stigma of poverty. The resultant reluctance on the part of many rural people to declare themselves, or to be recognised by others as, poor or needy begs important questions about the functioning of care, welfare and justice in rural settings. In practical terms, issues are raised about how care and welfare, such as that provided by food banks, can be delivered via more discreet and ‘ordinary’ practices that evade potentially stigmatic scrutiny. In wider cultural terms, notions of rural community need to be transformed to embrace more overtly notions of mutual care, not simply as expressions of charitable paternalism but as potentially hopeful spaces of performative and affective in-commonness (see Clope et al 2017). Further research is needed that can extend understandings of rural cultures of poverty denial and exclusion (see, for example, Milbourne and Donnelly 2012) but also of the self-help, care and mutuality that are also evident in some rural food banks, as well as in refugee resettlement schemes and homeless services, for example (Clope et al 2007).

Third, while there is growing awareness of the ‘unholy alliance’ between corporate agribusiness and the anti-hunger movement in the USA (Fisher 2017), less attention has been focused on the

relationships between food insecurity and the employment and contracting practices of supermarkets and food retailers in the UK. Researching food insecurity in rural areas could help illuminate some of the wider injustices of the capitalist food system and supermarket supply chains in particular (Willoughby and Gore, 2017) which are increasingly evident in, for example, the material scarcities faced by low paid workers on hyper-flexible contracts in food production, processing, catering, and retail who experience food insecurity themselves (Wynne-Jones 2014; Cox 2015; Minkoff-Zern 2014; Lever and Milbourne 2017; MacKrell and Pemberton 2018).

Fourth, the paper raises several questions about rural austerity and the local state. Though most UK food banks receive no funding from government, and the Trussell Trust advises its members not to enter into service agreements with local authorities (May et al 2019) a recent survey of independent food banks in England found that of the 114 food banks surveyed, 36.8% had received local government funding (including parish councils, district councils, unitary authorities, etc.) and a further 22.8% had received In-kind support of some kind (for example, reduced rates or free premises) from local government (Loopstra et al 2019). From this and our own case studies it appears that rural austerity is reshaping relationships between the local state and voluntary sector in important and diverse ways.

Most obviously, in each of the case-studies above the local state played an integral role in establishing and supporting food banks in their area. For example, one of the food banks we worked with in Devon was established following a meeting between its founders and the local benefits office and District Council, and soon after opening was invited to join the council's welfare task group and went on to distribute the council's Local Discretionary Hardship Fund. Although the manager was keen to insist this did not constitute a service-level agreement, another received payments from the local council for each food parcel given out. And a third had a local Conservative councillor on the board of trustees and - in exchange for the use of a building for a pepper corn rent – had taken up a key role in the delivery of local welfare: providing hardship loans (set up via a church fund) and a fuel poverty scheme (funded by older people donating their Winter Fuel payment) to provide pre-paid cards redeemable at a local convenience store. These charitable schemes encapsulate the mix of paternalist (the use of pre-paid cards over cash payments) and philanthropic (the giving by those with plenty to those less fortunate) attitudes that often shape the local cultures of welfare in rural areas (Milbourne 2004) but which seem to be taking on a renewed importance as the local state is further hollowed out. In South Wales, one of the food banks we worked with had its salary costs paid through the Welsh Government's Communities First initiative for several years, whilst one of the Valley authorities played an important part in setting up four Trussell Trust food banks by helping to co-ordinate the

collection and distribution of food from local supermarkets. Taken together, these examples suggest the growing institutionalisation of food charity in rural areas is less a by-product of government strategically 'looking the other way' (Riches 2002), than a process actively facilitated by local state actors.

Finally, in our account of different local 'food bank scenes' (Cloke et al 2010) we have offered some examples at least of the potential for food banks to cleave themselves from dominant constructions of philanthropy and morally conservative charity and create dissonant voices in the local welfare landscape – whether through their operational procedures, campaigning work or a wider 'neighbourhood effect' associated with its network of volunteers and donors (see also Williams et al., 2016). But an important caveat remains. If local campaigns are simply publicity drives for charitable donations, the political resonance that results from such activity will likely give only the illusion of effective action (Poppendieck 1998). Instead, food banks need to be networked into wider coalitions which eschew the dominant narration of food bank users as victims of misfortune or individuals culpable for their situation (Dixon 2015) and develop stories that offer more radical structural critique. If food banks can serve as political catalysts in revealing the extent of food insecurity in rural areas and challenge deeply entrenched cultures of denial then they may in turn mount a wider challenge to a backward-looking and notably nostalgic idyll as the only guide to the social and political geographies of rurality.

Following Shucksmith (2018) might it now be possible to re-imagine rural places in terms of desired futures rather than nostalgic myths? If so, this will involve renegotiating relations between austerity, exclusion and care: calling out, illuminating and eliminating the 'evils' (Shucksmith 2018) of austerity; recognising a contemporary role for care in rural place-making, not as a reactionary or solely charitable impulse when faced with no alternative or when constrained by cultural politics of exclusion and purification, but as an integral part of a networked rural development agenda that involves rejuvenated state agencies as well as appropriate volunteer-based initiatives (also see Milbourne 2015). Such developments capture a key tension, of course, between a recognition of the need for greater state responsibility for welfare (and therefore the unsatisfactory nature of charitable provision where state provision should be occurring) and of places like food banks as potential spaces of hope, greater in-commonness and political conscientisation and as sites where an affective politics of beyond-welfare may yet break out.

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