A Small-Scale Qualitative Evaluation of Bensham Food Co-operative

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Contents

1.0 Introduction

The report will take the following structure. It will: describe how Bensham Food Co-operative (BCFC hereafter) works; discuss who uses it, and why; detail who volunteers are, and their perspectives on BCFC; and outline key positives of the service, as well as reported and observed suggestions for improvement. Finally, the report will offer a series of recommendations based on the findings.

2.0 Summary

- The BCFC has been in operation since April 2016 and has fed 7,565 people to the end of September 2017; 3009 of those fed were children. Many of those fed are repeat visitors. In the first year, it cost £2144 to provide food to 4743 people, a cost of less than £0.50 per person per week
- It is not intended that the food provided by BCFC is the only food that the beneficiary eats that week; it is intended to be supplementary to other sources of food, although for some, the food received forms the majority of their weekly diet
- The BCFC is a partnership of three independent local charities – Peace of Mind, Soul Food Spaces and Corpus Christi Church. One of the partnering charities buys food – although donations are received too, and have steadily increased since its inception – whilst the church provides space, facilities and refreshments at no cost
- The main beneficiaries are from the asylum seekers community, although it has become more popular with the 'local' white British community in recent months
- Beneficiaries of BCFC must first become a member and receive a membership card; the only requirement for membership is that they live locally
- Each beneficiary can take a set amount of food. This was decided so as to allow single people, who have fewer alternative sources of support available to them, can take as much as families and couples
- Unlike Trussell Trust foodbanks, there is no voucher system and beneficiaries are able to access support on a weekly basis for as long as they need it; once they are members they remain members
- The BCFC is about more than just food – it offers clothing and household items, provides tea, coffee and biscuits, and helps with the improvement of English language

skills. It also offers community, friendship and support, and may facilitate the forming and maintaining of social networks for some

- The BCFC manager, Lyn (all names are pseudonyms), is a lynchpin of the food co-op. She spends many hours each week providing support and guidance to beneficiaries
- Beneficiaries describe the support offered by BCFC as "*life saving*", *"a blessed project",* and "*a godsend*"
- The BCFC was described as having positive impacts upon mental health; for instance, one beneficiary said *"It gives people an escape from all their worries for at least an hour"*
- The role that BCFC plays in providing holistic support to those from the refugee community appears to be invaluable. Through BCFC, beneficiaries are supported in things such as speaking to housing providers, arranging and attending appointments about their immigration status, and finding and furnishing accommodation
- People enjoy receiving fresh food that they can cook with, stating it's *"much healthier than a foodbank"* and "*I love me veg. In here it's just like coming to a shop, you're not scared to speak to anyone*"
- Mostly, beneficiaries struggled to identify areas of BCFC that could be improved upon. However, the main suggestion we heard was that the amount of food given could be altered depending on family size
- At times, there are tensions over how much food people are allowed to take
- The location and administration of BCFC was also highlighted. Currently, the space is very well utilised, but several volunteers pointed out that it can be difficult to work in such a small space
- It is important to think strategically about the longer-term sustainability of BCFC. At present, BCFC functions very well with support from a small, dedicated pool of volunteers, with relatively stable numbers of beneficiaries. However, if numbers were to grow considerably or volunteers begin to move on, plans may need to be in place for managing this.

3.0 Context

Community responses to poverty and hunger have long existed in the UK (Caraher and Cowburn, 2004). However, rising activity and the growing media profile of the Trussell Trust

foodbank network, and the recent appearance of the term 'food aid' within the UK context, fosters the impression that the provision of food assistance to help people access free or subsidised food is new (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2014). Unlike some forms of emergency food aid – notably the Trussell Trust model of foodbank use – which formally restrict who can and cannot receive food by using a referral system (as detailed in Garthwaite 2016a), few forms of non-emergency provision directly exclude people and many aim for inclusivity (Donald and Blay-Palmer, 2006).

Specific groups are being particularly affected. For many asylum seekers living in the community, a lack of access to employment, social services and government financial assistance leads to an increased risk of food insecurity (McKay and Dunn 2016: 344). Collins et al. (2015) have argued that some asylum seekers' diets are comparable to pre-Welfare State conditions. Loopstra and Lalor (2017) found that in a Trussell Trust context, adults seeking asylum are over-represented among food bank users compared to the general population.

We had intended to provide detailed local information on the demographics of the population of Bensham. Unfortunately, the council don't hold this data and are presently requesting it from another source so that work can be started to include this in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.

4.0 Research questions

This study has sought to address the following research questions:

- What works about the Bensham Community Food Co-op (hereafter BCFC) model, and what could be improved?
- What are the perspectives of staff and volunteers at the BCFC?
- How does the BCFC impact on those using it (particularly in terms of health and wellbeing)?
- Does the BCFC meet the needs of particular groups, for instance, asylum seekers and refugees?

5.0 Design and Method

The evaluation was qualitative in nature, in order to adapt to a flexible approach that will be informed by the BCFC stakeholders and members of the Research Advisory Group (Councillor Catherine Donovan, Mandy Cheetham, BCFC manager Lyn*). Data collection included:

- Orientation visits to meet the co-ordinators, advice workers and volunteers and to observe BCFC in operation;
- Interviews with BCFC volunteers;
- Time 'hanging around' at BCFC, including sitting in on interactions between volunteers and clients, informal chatting with beneficiaries and volunteers and helping prepare and distribute food.

Fieldwork began on 20th June 2017 with two researchers (Kayleigh Garthwaite and Joel Halligan). On the first day, we observed how the food co-op worked, introduced ourselves to volunteers and beneficiaries, and made detailed notes and observations once members knew who we were, and the purpose of our visit. Rebekka Shenfine, public health registrar, attended two sessions, and completed one stakeholder interview (including transcription).

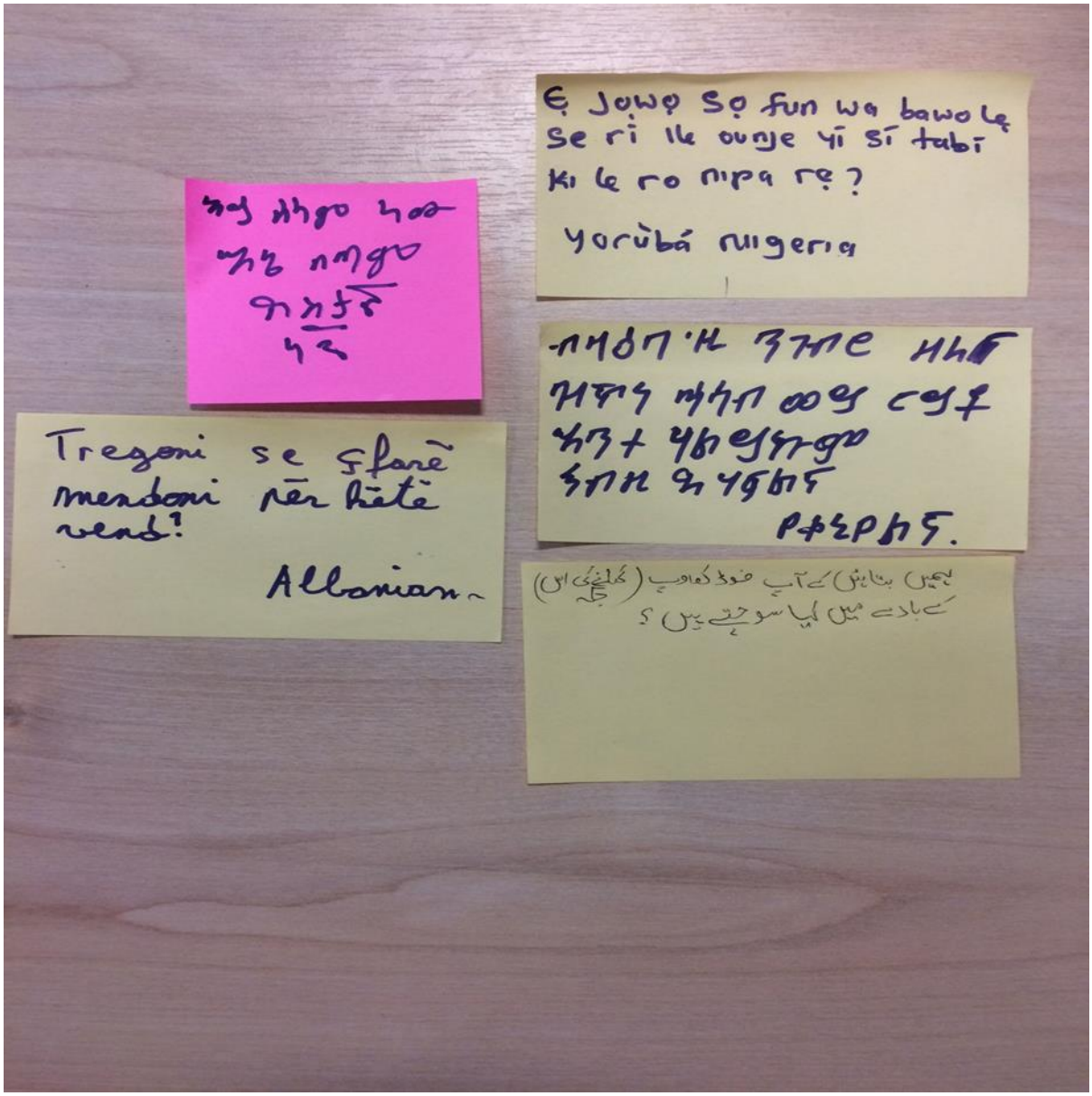
In total, 10 visits were undertaken - a total of approximately 25 hours of fieldwork. Interviews with key stakeholders have been completed and transcribed. Detailed fieldnotes have been taken by KG, JH and RS. In addition, JH inputted attendance data from BCFC into an Excel spreadsheet. This allowed us to identify trends over time, and to track if single person households or families were the key users of the service.

We had initially planned to undertake semi-structured interviews with beneficiaries. However, when we began the fieldwork, we made the decision not to carry out semi-structured interviews due to several reasons. Firstly, there were issues with language barriers and beneficiaries being fully able to understand the aims of the research, confidentiality and ethical issues. We were able to translate the information sheet into Arabic, but this still did not cover the vast amount of languages spoken at BCFC. We considered bringing in an interpreter, but given the sensitive and complex issues asylum seekers are dealing with, introducing an official figure such as this was deemed inappropriate. Secondly, the BCFC is very busy and it was obvious that at times people came for food and then left fairly quickly.

Thirdly, there was a lack of privacy to chat about often personal and sensitive reasons why people accessed BCFC. This approach was chosen for a variety of reasons: importantly, the manager of BCFC suggested this approach had been successful before in an exercise to find out what people thought of the food co-op. The following field notes show this:

> **Field Notes 18/7/17 KG**
>
> Me and Joel went over earlier today, 9:30 ish. It was much less hectic and definitely a better idea. We asked people to translate our question of 'What do you think of the food co-op?' into their own languages. It seemed to work well, and we got Tigrinya Portuguese, Albanian, Urdu, and Yoruba. We asked if people would teach us to say thank you in their language, too, so we had some fun with that! We were in the aisle of the church today, with chairs, which seemed to work better than stood near the door. Started to get some constructive, critical feedback today, mainly around the fact that despite household size, people receive the same amount of food. This was also linked to ethnicity by a white British couple who came. They'd been to BCFC before.

Using post-its allowed us to gather people's thoughts in a way that would have been difficult to do in an in-depth interview. It was evident that people coming to the food co-op do not have a lot of time. The post-its allowed people to chat to us for a few minutes, before getting on with choosing the food they wanted. It was clear from the beginning that language would be a difficulty for us. We recorded that one week, 25 different languages were spoken. We can only speak English. With the help of the beneficiaries, we were able to translate the question of 'Tell us what you think of the food co-op' into a variety of different languages, such as Yoruba, Arabic, Tigrinya, Urdu, Portuguese, and Albanian. This enabled beneficiaries to fully understand what we were asking them. It was also clear that our location within BCFC was important; the second week, we were positioned near the door as people were leaving, and we felt like we were in the way.



[Translated post-it notes]

We found this approach to be successful; it enabled us to firstly explain who we were and why we were there, but also allowed people to explain in their own words what they thought of the BCFC, why they were there, and their opinions on the food, the service, and how it made them feel.

Three face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with volunteers, the chair of a local food charity, and the BCFC manager. These were undertaken either in the church, by telephone, or at Gateshead Council. These interviews were either recorded via the usage of detailed notes, or via audio recording. These interviews focused on:

- How BCFC was set up
- What BCFC does
- Who uses it
- Where the food comes from
- What works well
- Key challenges with BCFC
- How BCFC differs from other models of emergency food provision
- Other support that is offered at BCFC

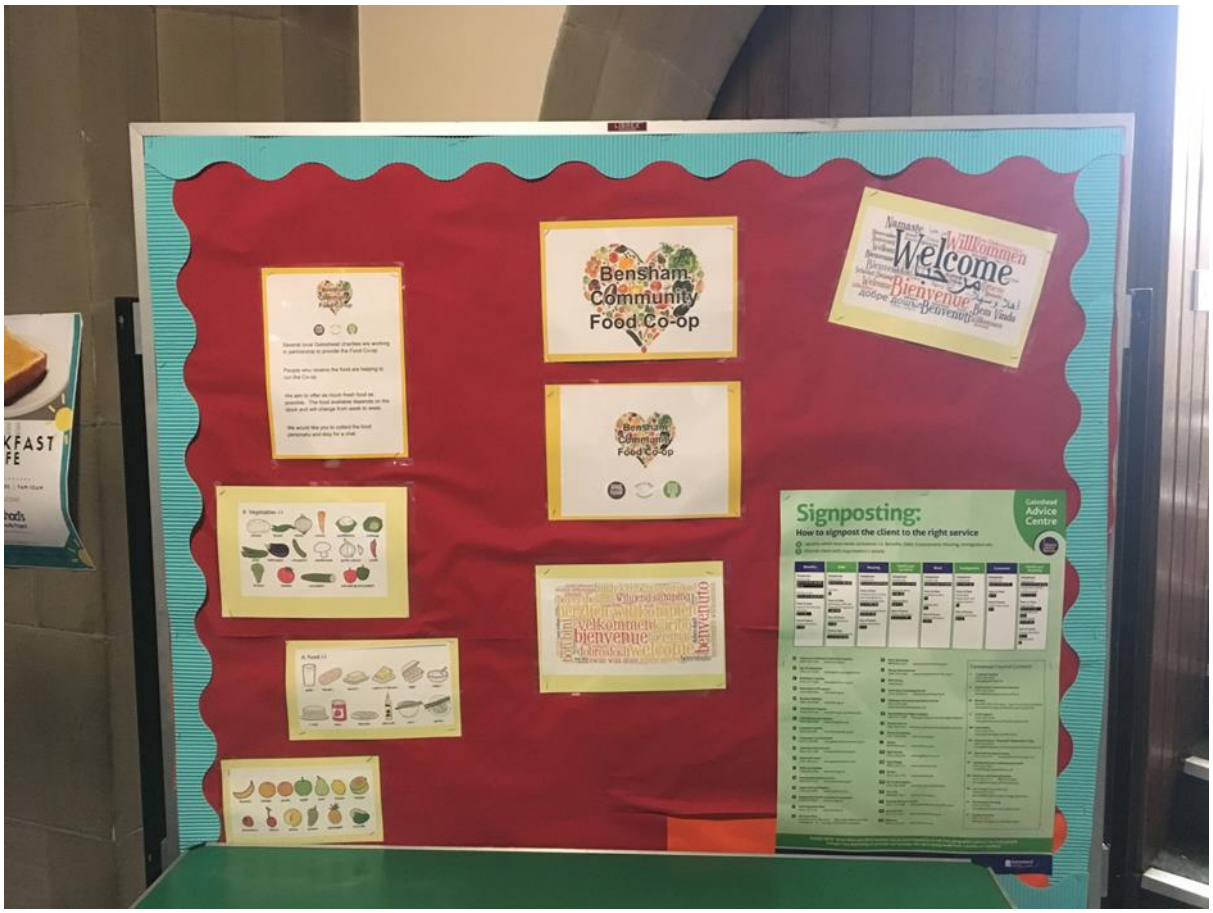
Photographs were taken and field notes were made following each visit. These are included in this report, where appropriate.

6.0 How does BCFC work?

6.1 Venue & setup

BCFC is located within Corpus Christi church in Bensham, Gateshead. It opens once a week on Tuesdays between 10:00am and 12:00pm. The BCFC does not tend to advertise its presence – much of its membership has come from word-of-mouth. On our first day at the co-op, we (KG & JH) decided to try and understand how BCFC worked, and made sure we introduced ourselves to people. The following from our fieldnotes explains our first impressions in detail:

> **Field Notes 21/6/17 KG**
>
> It was the first day for me and Joel to go to the food co-op today. I got lost (even with Google maps!) and arrived too early, 9:30. Lyn had said that we could go in earlier than the people coming for food at 10am, but I wasn't sure if we could just go in or not so me and Joel waited outside with the others queuing up. I took a bag of donations – red lentils, salt, chickpeas, fresh peaches, toilet rolls, and bags of spices. People were looking at the bags as we waited to go in, probably wondering who we were. Me and Joel were the only White British people stood outside in the queue.
>
> Once inside, we were faced with a small dark space. A table is at the front, Lyn stood behind it. To the right there is the main part of the church with pews, and windows, but this back area is pretty dark and cramped. Shelves line the space to the right, and there are signs telling people they can take two items from each shelf. Peanut butter, chickpeas, tea, coffee, rice, sugar. In front is a table with fresh bread, spices packaged into little plastic bags (it smells amazing!), and other cakes and biscuits from the local Tesco. A table to the left has biscuits, tea and coffee for people, and behind that there are toilet rolls, toiletries, and sweets, but these are kept out of sight.



[Welcome board as you enter the food co-op]

During the interview with Chris, the chair of Soul Food Space - one of the partnering charities who help to run BCFC and one of the people involved in its set-up - told us that initially BCFC was not intended to be in a church; a shop was the first choice in order to create a "*normal environment"* rather than one of charity (as might be when something is attached to a church). But, Corpus Christi were generous and supportive, and offered their space for use, for free, in order to get it established. Between them, they drew together their resources to set the ball rolling and get the co-op set up.

Volunteer Heather also volunteers at the local Trussell Trust foodbank. She has been involved with BCFC since it started. When asked about her thoughts on the venue of the co-op, she recognised that if they were to be in shop premises, that there would be a cost to this which she isn't sure that they could afford. So, for that reason she envisages BCFC will remain where it is for the foreseeable future. She thinks that, in the longer-term, the church would like to

invest in creating a better social space that might better accommodate the BCFC, but she stressed that this is very much a longer-term aim for the church and unlikely to happen soon.

Lyn, the food co-op manager, told us that she "*wanted somewhere people could come when they needed food but they didn't have to prove almost who they were or why they didn't have any food*". She stressed that they "*didn't want to know about why they'd been sanctioned"* and instead would "*take people on face value*". For these reasons, it was decided that the only requirement for people to become a member of the BCFC would be that they lived locally. Once a person has become a member, they are given a membership card; at subsequent visits all they need to do is produce their membership card to use the BCFC.

Another organisation – Peace of Mind – had been doing some work in the area and had identified refugees and asylum seekers as a group in particular need of help; this was something that Chris had not really considered. He had envisaged the food co-op helping local people in need. Once they had found the right person to essentially be the project manager for it – Lyn – they set about the practicalities of getting it set up. Chris stressed to us the importance of the partnership working between the three organisations – Soul Food Spaces, Peace of Mind, and Corpus Christi Church – that enabled the BCFC to come into being, and that also allow it to continue to the present day. Without the commitment and input from each of these charities, Chris does not believe that it would have been possible to realise their ambitions to set up the BCFC. For example, whilst Soul Food Spaces provided the funding for the initial purchase of food stock, Corpus Christi offered the space for free, and Lyn set about sourcing volunteers and setting out how the day-to-day running of the BCFC might go.

All involved felt that the church had been extremely supportive. They cleared the confessionals on the left for the trolleys and have now cleared the ones on the right, and allowed BCFC to store a mountain of donations on the balcony and cleared out two cupboards. Not long after BCFC had started, the church also bought a fridge for vegetables to be stored in, preventing lots of vegetables going to waste. Even when 'clutter' overflows to the lobby, they remain uncomplaining. Chris acknowledged that they are limited by space at the church – initially they had wanted to open twice a week but this wasn't feasible, partly because of space, but mainly because of the additional complexity that this would involve. For example, if it were to open twice a week, there would have to be decisions about whether members would be able to come twice a week, and if not, how attendance might be managed;

in addition, it would mean sourcing more volunteers or asking existing ones to commit to more hours, which might not be possible for some.

Chris described to us how, as the BCFC has grown, the amount of donations of food – and other things too, like clothes and household goods – has grown, to the point where they spend less now on buying in food than they did at the outset, despite feeding larger numbers of people each week. It is the longer-term aim of the BCFC to become self-sufficient in terms of food, by encouraging members who are no longer in need of food from the BCFC to offer donations when they can; this would mean that BCFC would realise its aim to be a true 'co-operative'. Already, many of the volunteers are people who are members of the BCFC who want to offer their time as a way to give something back to the BCFC.

Although BCFC is only open on Tuesdays between 10:00am and 12:00pm, the provision and support offered isn't just available then. Lyn also makes phone calls to housing providers such as Jomast and G4S, sources furniture, and is always on hand to speak to or visit people using BCFC. Throughout the research, she was described as "*an unofficial social worker*", *"a blessing*", "*a lynchpin*", and "*a godsend*". It was clear to us through our hours spent there that Lyn is a dynamic force who drives BCFC, and she is clearly passionate about helping people and offering them support.

6.2 What is provided?

Field Notes 20/6/17 JH

'Beneficiaries', as they are referred to at the co-op, are given a mixture of fresh and tinned foods, including oil, bread, spices, tinned peas and beans (of all varieties), fresh potatoes, and carrots. They give out some toiletries too, and also have a small rack of second-hand clothes. If a beneficiary needs something specific, like utensils or small furnishings for a new flat, the co-op will try and source this if they can, often by asking for donations from parishioners.

BCFC is not intended to be a recipient's only source of food. The aim for the BCFC is to provide a variety of food – including some fresh fruit and vegetables – than can supplement people's other sources of food (whilst offering access to other services too).

According to Chris, in terms of the food offer, it was important that they not offer just tinned tomatoes and dried pasta, but that fresh food should be part of the mix, too. When he goes to the wholesalers, he will get the staples (potatoes, carrots, onions etc) but tries to get some more unusual vegetables when he can, such as pointed peppers and beetroot. Lyn will then feedback about how popular (or unpopular) a particular thing has been, for example people didn't seem too keen on red cabbage. People always take the white sliced bread first, the wholegrain non-sliced always gets left behind. Chris stressed the importance of offering seasonal produce if possible, and giving people a choice of different vegetables. In terms of meat, it was suggested that offering it would be "*unmanageably complex*" due to food hygiene issues that would result from having meat in a non-sterile environment. Instead, other forms of protein such as beans and pulses are available; around once a month, eggs will be given out too.

We noticed that items such as beetroot and cabbages were often left at the end of the day; onions and carrots were the most popular, and sometimes these ran out before the end of the Tuesday morning session.

[Fresh vegetables on offer]

Fareshare, the UK's largest charity fighting hunger and food waste, deliver food each week, and what they bring will vary from one week to another; sometimes they're not sure what they will get. Despite this, she thinks the staples are always provided, such as bread, rice, pasta, and that people will always go away with something that they can prepare a meal with, i.e. oil, spices, beans etc. Lyn told us that each time she puts an order in from Fareshare (fortnightly) she orders certain things, i.e. cereal. They then usually get about 50% of what they order, but the rest will depend on what Fareshare have received (for example, from supermarkets). But, she says, Fareshare know them and the kinds of foods that they use, for example, they have brought them bags of rice and chapatti flour before.

Heather also told us it is important to be respectful of the different cultures who use it, so they keep tinned meat products separate to the rest, so that people can take this if they want to but that it isn't obvious (it's on a shelf at the 'end' after the shoes and clothes). She thinks this works well. Because of the variety of the different things that they give out from one week to the next, and the unfamiliarly that some of the beneficiaries have with some of these,

she said that in the past they have done some cooking events. For example, for a while they had a glut of borlotti beans that people didn't seem to want to take, so they prepared a spicy curry with them and then brought this in for people to try, with flatbreads. They then gave people paper copies of the recipe so that they could prepare this themselves at home if they wanted to. She said they've also done soup, roasted chickpeas, and udon noodles with beans and vegetables, all to give people ideas of how to use unfamiliar ingredients. In addition to the long-life food, Chris gets the fresh food in by going to the wholesalers every couple of weeks. Again, Heather feels that people always go away with something, even if some things are less popular than others. In the near future, they are aiming to use any leftover vegetables to make soup, which they will then be able to offer to beneficiaries when they come to the BCFC.

It is important to point out the food co-op is not just about only food. Each week, people were able to take clothes, including shoes, brightly coloured silk scarves, and children's wear. As the following field notes extract shows, food was just one part of the vast provision offered by BCFC:

> **Field Notes 8/8/17 KG**
>
> Lyn also gave us a list of items that had been given out in the past week – fridges, microwaves, shoe racks, book shelves, flower pots, pillows. "It's more than just giving someone a bag of sugar", she told us.

[Large selection of clothes]

Books are also available, which can help people to improve their English language skills. Household items can also be sourced by Lyn, and her husband would regularly travel to pick up items for people each week. Beneficiaries were extremely grateful and it was clear that these items made a huge difference to their quality of life. For instance, we spoke to a woman, Oti, who had flowers outside of her home in memory of her late mother. Vandals smashed the plants up and she was devastated. Lyn heard about this, and bought new plants for her and took them to her home. Oti told us: "*Lyn is so supportive to me and my family outside of the food co-op. It's made a huge difference to me*".

7.0 Who are the volunteers, and what do they think of BCFC?

The volunteers at BCFC are a mix of beneficiaries of the co-op, and 'local' people such as Heather and Dave. Heather told us that BCFC is managed by a good pool of volunteers who engender a lovely atmosphere. She said that she doesn't feel like there any strong personalities, in a good way - there's nobody who is domineering or seeks to take control of

the others. She said that there's no backbiting or people making others upset, which is good and perhaps surprising given the mix of people of different nationalities. She thinks that the volunteers there are very understanding of one another and good with each other, and that it's a very diverse bunch of people.

Lyn recognised that the volunteers have issues they're dealing with in their own lives, including access to food, mental health problems. The volunteers clearly had busy lives outside of BCFC. Those who had leave-to-remain worked long hours, sometimes in two jobs; they were responsible for childcare; went to the local college to do English classes; and spent time chasing up problems with their housing providers. Lyn commented that it can be stressful for volunteers, as they have their own issues, for instance, mental health issues that are often undiagnosed. They have constant stress. They are waiting for status, often for a very long time. Tensions can arise as they see others at BCFC getting it sooner than they have.

Tensions can also arise in the 'policing' of the food given out. The volunteers are each assigned to a particular area of BCFC – for instance, bread and spices, vegetables and clothes – and they then make sure that people coming for food only take the amount they're entitled to. Throughout the research, it was clear that this tended to work well overall, but issues could arise. The following field notes show this clearly:

> **Field Notes 8/8/17 JH**
>
> One of the volunteers was concerned that some people took advantage and tried to take too much. She also said that it was the same people that tended to do this, and also that she didn't know why; she said that they should understand that the food is for everybody.

Volunteer Heather acknowledges though that there are some people who do take advantage, and that it is generally the same people who try this, although she tries not to judge. In these cases, they just keep an eye out and, if they catch someone, they explain to them why they can't do this (because it's for everybody) and just keep an eye on them next time, and explain again if they catch them. However, she concedes that some people probably do get away with it from time to time. Despite this, she said that they've "*never had any trouble*". So even though there might be a little bit of discord between the locals and refugees when the locals think they're badly done to, this is minor and never escalates to anything serious.

Overall, Heather feels that the beneficiary-volunteers "*police it very well*". She thinks it's much preferable that they do this side of it, because in a similar situation themselves. For example, she said that she would feel uncomfortable, as a relatively privileged white person, going up to people who are really struggling and taking things off them if they'd taken too much. Whereas because the beneficiary-volunteers are in a similar situation, this evens out the power dynamics and so the beneficiaries probably take it better from them.

8.0 Who uses BCFC, and why?

The majority of people using BCFC are asylum seekers and refugees living in Bensham. Often, people have only very recently moved to the area, and have heard about it through other asylum seekers and refugees who use the service, or who volunteer. Lyn makes a note each week of the numbers of people who use the food co-op, and sends this round in a newsletter via email to trustees.

Table 1, below, shows the trends in the numbers of beneficiaries using BCFC since its inception up until September 2017. The total number of beneficiaries visiting BCFC each week has remained relatively stable since around September 2016; each week around 50 people sign-in. However, BCFC feeds a larger number of people than the numbers of sign-ins show, because many beneficiaries also use the food to feed children or other adults in their household. Typically, BCFC feeds around 110 people each week, of which around 45 a week are children.

Initially, the proportion of beneficiaries collecting food for themselves only (single adults) was greater than the proportion of beneficiaries collecting food for a family with children. However, since around March of 2017, the number of beneficiaries who are single adults has dropped, while the number of beneficiaries collecting food for a family has increased. At the same time, there has been an increase in the number of beneficiaries collecting food for a multiple adult household without children. There is now a roughly even split between the proportion of beneficiaries who visit BCFC to collect food for a single adult compared to those beneficiaries who collect food for a family.

Table 1: Average (mean) of number of beneficiaries, people fed, children fed, single adults fed and families fed per week, for each 8-week period since BCFC's inception

Period	*No. of people visiting BCFC*	*No. of people fed*	*No. of children fed*	*No. of single adults fed*	*No. of families fed*
12/04/16-31/05/16	29	64	29	20	12
07/06/16-26/07/16	39	77	30	25	14
02/08/16-20/09/16	44	81	28	29	14
27/09/16-15/11/16	58	110	38	38	20
22/11/16-10/01/17	54	105	40	32	21
17/01/17-07/03/17	52	107	44	30	22
14/03/17-02/05/17	46	103	43	23	20
09/05/17-27/06/17	49	114	47	23	23
04/07/17-22/08/17	52	116	48	25	24
*29/08/17-26/09/17**	50	112	48	26	24

* - 5-week period

One regular beneficiary is Markus, who came to the UK from Germany in the early 2000s. He speaks three languages fluently and told us about his dietician qualifications. He told us he lives on zero income, and doesn't claim for JSA. He uses the food co-op for his dinner and supper – "*friends help top it up*". He told us that BCFC even give him cat food – "*I wouldn't, couldn't, shouldn't expect this*". He's been coming here since November 2016, and seems to enjoy being part of the community. Some weeks, we watched as he sat and helped some of the asylum seekers with their English language skills. Markus told us the food co-op goes "*above and beyond*" for him and everyone else who uses it, and he struggled to find anything that could be improved about it. "*Beggars can't be choosers",* he would regularly say.

People and families from the local community with long-term health issues, addiction (alcohol and drugs), problems with social security benefits, and domestic violence also use BCFC. Lyn spoke about how local people were often "*very much on the margins*", and were often dealing with drug and alcohol addiction, and complex caring responsibilities.

The findings also suggest that people are not just accessing BCFC for food, including fresh food, but also to address social isolation, practical support, and access housing advice. It's not

just about the 2 hours when BCFC is open, but wider support. This theme will be picked up further in the following section.

9.0 Key positives of BCFC

9.1 Nature of BCFC

A key positive that arose from both fieldwork and observation is the nature of BCFC. From the beginning of the research, it was clear that BCFC was set up as an alternative to the Trussell Trust model of emergency food provision. Within the Trussell Trust network, people seeking food aid must first of all obtain a red voucher from a referring care professional, such as a GP, social worker, or Citizen's Advice Bureau worker. Then, they can exchange the voucher for 3 days of emergency food 3 times in a crisis period. There is little choice involved in this process, which can result in stigma, shame and embarrassment (Garthwaite 2016).

Chris was explicit in this being a key aim of BCFC from the outset, and said he wanted BCFC to be "*an alternative to Trussell Trust foodbanks, something that offers choice, dignity, and fresh food*". Chris also told us they "*wanted just to offer people in poverty, regardless of their circumstances, good quality food and choice of food, and to give people the opportunity to be part of the solution rather than passive recipients of benevolent charity*". BCFC aims to offer a more personalised service as far as food goes, by getting to know the beneficiaries and trying, where possible, to meet their needs. For example, by giving olive oil to one of the people who comes in who used to be a chef and likes to cook with it.

Interestingly, we found that people sometimes described BCFC as a "*shop",* suggesting that the stigma and shame associated with emergency food provision was less evident here. The following example from fieldnotes shows this clearly:

> **Field Notes 22/8/17 RS**
>
> On leaving I was walking behind two women with pushchairs and two older children. One of the older children looked being and said "she is from the shop, she works there". I thought that this insight from a child was interesting in that he sees the food co-op as a shop. I wondered if this is a product of what he has been told by his parent or whether that is the impression given due to the element of choice and regular attendance.

Others filled in post-its to tell us "*It's good we can choose and pick, many things are very useful*".

The fact that people did not require a voucher to receive food was described as a positive for people, especially those who had accessed a Trussell Trust foodbank previously. Being able to choose the food was a key part of what worked well. We were told that there was *"Too much red tape and rules at the other one [foodbank]"* and that having a *"choice of food that you can cook something with, fresh food"* made BCFC *"healthier than a foodbank*".

9.2 Freshness of food offered

McKay and Dunn (2016: 345) observed how in their research of an Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) in Melbourne, Australia, "a *degree of control over their food choices and to ensure, where possible, culturally appropriate food selection*" was highly important.

We found that people regularly emphasised the importance of the fresh food on offer. We were told that people enjoy receiving fresh food that they can cook with, stating it's "*much healthier than a foodbank"* and they appreciated having *"[a] choice of food that you can cook something with".* This allowed one of the local beneficiaries to make spaghetti bolognaise with her grandson now that she had fresh vegetables and pasta. There was always demand for the fresh vegetables, bread and spices, and also eggs and cooking oil, which were not always available every week but were sought after. JH and KG asked people what they would make with the food, and people described making fresh curries, stews, soups, and salads. Being able to cook healthy meals was seen as important not just for the taste, but also for the health benefits of eating a healthy diet; health benefits are explored further in the following section.

9.3 Health impacts

Aside from the obvious health benefits of being able to access healthy produce, beneficiaries found it helpful to come to BCFC in terms of both their mental and physical health. Throughout the research, we were told that *"[BCFC] gives people an escape from their worries for at least an hour*". This came from a beneficiary who also volunteered at BCFC. Others told us "*for me, it's a life saver*". The importance of meeting others in a similar situation was also described as being beneficial: "*I meet other people who are struggling like me*".

Skipping meals and subsequent weight loss were described as some of the side effects of being unable to access adequate food. A 'local' woman, Tracey, told us that she had issues with alcohol addiction, domestic violence, and chronic low income. She said:

> "I was struggling really badly. I lost 3 stone in 2 months. I was a size 16, now I'm an 8. [BCFC is] so friendly and so welcoming, not intimidating at all. Nobody should be scared to come in. In here it's just like coming to a shop, you're not scared to speak to anyone".

9.4 More than food

BCFC is about much more than food – it's about forming and maintaining social networks, a community, friendship, support, and improving English language skills. People told us the co-op provided a "*great welcome, for all walks of life. [It gives a] chance to meet others and chat, socialise".* This was reiterated by others who said *"People are given an opportunity to chat among the different nationalities and feel welcome, and feel hope".* The function of the BCFC as providing a welcoming space for people from many different nationalities to come together was an important one.

The role that BCFC plays in providing holistic support to those from the asylum seeker and refugee community in particular appears to be invaluable. Through engagement with BCFC, beneficiaries are supported in things such as speaking to housing providers, arranging and attending appointments about their immigration status, and finding and furnishing accommodation.

The sense of community constructed at BCFC was both described to us and witnessed throughout our time there. The following field notes illustrate this well:

> **Field Notes 26/9/17 JH**
>
> Clearly, the food side of things is still very important and it isn't as if people come and don't take food, but the way it acts as a place for people to come, chat, get out of the cold, socialise (if they want to) and get help and support with other aspects of their lives says a lot about the utility that food can have for acting as a catalyst for projects that seek to do something beyond, or even unrelated to, food.

English language improvement, having an area for tea and coffee, socialising with others, children playing, and informal networks of support all created a positive and supportive atmosphere. This could also lead to the improvement of self-confidence, especially for volunteers, who acted as advisors to other recently arrived refugees.

In the mixing of 'local' residents with asylum seekers and refugees, it is possible that tensions could arise. Heather said occasionally there is some tension, but that this stems from a perception from the locals' point of view that they think the refugees sometimes get favourable treatment, or that they're getting things 'before' them. She told of an occasion when she was outside and saw some 'locals' hanging around near the entrance, looking uncomfortable, at which she asked them if they wanted to come in. She said that the person/people said that they 'didn't think it was for them', but they were reassured that it was for everyone. Locals did sometimes tell us this; for instance, we were told by one local man who used the food co-op regularly "*it seems that some members are allowed to take more than they should and staff turn blind eye yet some can't*" but he also said that "*apart from that staff are great*". Because the volunteers get to know people, they often know when someone is really *"in desperate need"*, in which case they will try and give them a bit more in the offering. They speculated that this might be why some of the more astute beneficiaries sometimes claim that some people get special treatment..

10.0 Key challenges

Throughout the research, beneficiaries struggled to express constructive criticism of the food co-op. More often, they expressed their gratitude and were keen to describe how BCFC had impacted upon their lives in a positive way. However, some challenges were reported and observed.

10.1 Amount of food given

People suggested that the amount of food given could be altered depending on family size. Currently, everybody receives the same amount of food, as one beneficiary told us: "*I know another person who got one card for 5, that's not enough food for them as all people get the*

same. Same for another family. There's only help for the people who come here". The following field notes highlight this as an issue:

> **Field Notes 17/7/17 JH**
>
> There were a couple of more 'critical' comments today from people, namely about how everyone gets the same quantity, irrespective of circumstances. So, a single person effectively gets the same as a person with 5 children. Other than that, people were generally keen to express their gratitude and were complementary in their comments.

The BCFC sees it slightly differently, however. When the BCFC was being set up and it was being decided how much food people might be able to take, it was decided that single people should get the same amount of food as families and couples, as it had been identified that single people had less recourse to other sources of support compared to families. The BCFC therefore deems it that single people get *as much* *as* families and couples, rather than families and couples getting only as much as single people. The uniform amount of food given out, regardless of household size, also makes it easier to manage for the volunteers; if different people were able to take different amounts, this would be difficult to 'police', and may also deplete their food stocks faster.

The volunteers were also keen to point out to us that the food people receive from BCFC is not an entitlement, but something that is contingent on charity. They acknowledged that some may perceive it different to others, and think of it as an entitlement, but that they try and manage people's expectations around the limits of what BCFC can offer them. This can be linked to the 'right to food' (Lambie-Mumford 2013) debate, in that charitable food provision - whilst providing a valuable stopgap - is contingent and not guaranteed to people, and that the state should be ensuring people's right to food. For them, an interesting future research question would be why some people seem to perceive BCFC more as an entitlement whilst others don't. They have even said that in an ideal world they wouldn't be there, but they are filling a gap that's otherwise left void for the moment.

10.2 Space and capacity

Heather thinks at the minute that the numbers using BCFC are fairly stable – around 45-60 – although she does recall the one day that they had over 100 people; she said that they were "*totally wiped out*". She thinks that if numbers did grow, it would be down to the trustees as

to how to deal with this, and to think about and make decisions about what would need to be done to accommodate such growth.

If numbers did continue to grow, this would also raise further questions about the suitability of the church as a location for the co-op. Currently, the small space is very well utilised, but several volunteers pointed out that it can be difficult to work in such a restricted space: "*Would be good to have a separate building then it wouldn't be so much work for the volunteers. Lifting, up and down stairs. Less to clean up".*

10.3 Policing and abuse of the system

As previously discussed, the explicit aim of BCFC was to provide a space that was different to a Trussell Trust foodbank – somewhere that was less bureaucratically difficult to access and access not time-limited, somewhere less begetting of stigma, and somewhere that offered its users a little bit more choice and, by extension, more dignity. In this way, it has achieved its aim to be an alternative model to a Trussell Trust foodbank, but some key challenges remain. Whilst it does offer some choice, this is within a fairly restricted range of items from which to choose, especially for White British beneficiaries who may be less aware of how to use chapatti flour, chickpeas and lentils.

There are tensions over how much food people are allowed to take. We were told regularly by both beneficiaries and volunteers that "*I know that some people are taking advantage*".

11.0 Recommendations based on the findings

11.1 Sustainability

Thinking strategically about the longer-term sustainability of BCFC. At present, BCFC functions very well with support from a small, dedicated pool of volunteers, with relatively stable numbers of beneficiaries. The role played by Lyn at BCFC cannot be underestimated. However, if numbers were to grow considerably or volunteers begin to move on, plans may need to be in place for managing this. Heather spoke about looking at the possibility of having people from other services, i.e. CAB, coming in to the BCFC once a month, for example, to do some of the things that Lyn does now.

11.2 Clear signs indicating how much to take

We thought that perhaps putting signs up with numbers on above the different sections might make it clearer how many items are allowed, and remove the need for beneficiaries to be constantly asking the volunteers. There are already signs for tins and spices, but these could be places near the vegetables, and also the bread. Obviously, the amount given out can very due to the donations received, but a bit of extra guidance could help beneficiaries. These need not be anything sophisticated: for example, there could be a stock of various pre-printed numbers on A4 paper from which an appropriate number, depending on the quantity of that week's stock, could be drawn and then simply be stuck up above each crate of vegetables before each session. The volunteers could still be there to keep an eye on things, but could possibly blend more into the background, making it a more dignified experience.

11.3 Regular 'debriefs' with the volunteers

This could be something that already occurs, but if not, it could provide a space for volunteers to discuss any issues they might be facing with regards to their commitment to BCFC, but also to wider issues. As Lyn pointed out, many potentially have mental health issues and have experienced severe trauma in their lives. A monthly debrief could help to alert Lyn and the others to any particular issues.

11.4 Quantity of food offered

Offering different amounts of food to different people would change the whole dynamic of the BCFC, making it more akin to the Trussell Trust foodbank. Based on our findings, this is not something trustees would be keen to do. Doing so would change the ethics of the whole model. Although it is clear that families are one of the biggest users of BCFC, changing the quantity of food in the food offer is not something we would recommend based on our findings.

11.5 Replicability of the model

BCFC has developed to the point where Lyn acts like a social worker, doing far more than just making sure people get food. Lyn has a list of contacts to do this; these are contacts that are vital to this part of the role, which others may not have. This could be a stumbling block if Lyn

were not to be there, or if it were attempted to replicate the project elsewhere. Perhaps some of the more established volunteers could 'shadow' Lyn so that if Lyn was unable to be there for a certain time period, the co-op would still continue to function effectively.

12.0 Conclusion

BCFC is an essential part of the community, not just for asylum seekers and refugees, but increasingly for White British people who live in Bensham. The food offered is fresh, healthy and allows people to cook their own food from scratch. BCFC is about "*more than food*", as we were often told throughout the research. It provides a space for people not only to come together and socialise, but also to access wider support to help with their multiple and complex needs.

In particular, Lyn is central to BCFC. She signposts people to further support, whilst also spending considerable time dealing with issues with benefits, housing and income. Being both a beneficiary and a volunteer could boost the self-confidence of beneficiaries, who used their own experiences to help others who were new to the area.

Although there are clearly challenges – for instance, the amount of food given, suitability of the space, and policing the system - BCFC is well-run and provides people with "*a lifeline*" where people "*go the extra mile for you*". Going forward, possible recommendations focus on: sustainability; better signposting of how much food people can take; and thoughts on replicability of the model.

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