

November 2024

When the going gets tough the good get going

A case study of Ipswich Top-up Shops:
delivering community food provision across Ipswich

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Acknowledgements

The University of Suffolk is grateful to the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich for their support. They have helpfully allowed us access to the Ipswich Top-up Shop network to conduct this research and given us this introductory statement:

“The Ipswich Top Up Shops are a collaboration of 10 Anglican Churches across Ipswich, not just addressing food poverty but also creating community spaces that allow our customers access to external organisations, such as health advice, debt advice and general well-being. Our customers tell us that in these spaces they feel seen, heard, and valued.

We are available to all regardless of circumstance, are non-referral, and we each share a common aim of sharing God’s love across Ipswich. To do this, we have policies and procedures in place regards safeguarding as well as all the usual health and safety requirements.

We don’t seek to replace the statutory bodies, rather create spaces whereby those bodies are able to support those in society that have need.”

Rev Lawrence Carey

Citation

Manning, M., Boyce, I., Coe, J., & Dogaru, C. (2024). When the going gets tough the good get going. A case study of Ipswich Top-up Shops: delivering community food provision across Ipswich. Institute of Social Justice and Crime at University of Suffolk.



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Executive summary

This report details the findings of a two-phase case study of Ipswich Top-up Shops, strategically located in 10 locations across the town, organised and managed by the Anglican Church

Each top-up shop opens one day a week, providing a seven-day provision of food and supplies for a voluntary donation of £2. There is no requirement for a referral to gain access to their service, as would be the case for a statutory service such as a food bank (Citizens Advice Bureau, 2024).

Phase 1 of this study was conducted between March and June 2023, comprising of participant observations at 10 top-up shops (TuS) supported by 20 qualitative interviews with organisers and volunteers. Phase 2 conducted in February 2024 comprised of three symposiums held at The University of Suffolk (UoS). These involved wide-ranging discussions, while sharing experiences with attendees comprised of TuS' organisers and volunteers, local authority workers, politicians and other charitable and voluntary organisations, each with an interest in poverty and charitable food provision in Ipswich and across Suffolk.

The purpose of the research was initially to explore the motivation and involvement of volunteers providing this essential service during a time of financial crisis. However, just before the research began, discussions arising within a co-production session with representatives from TuS and other local actors from the charitable sector suggested that while TuS appeared to be filling an important gap in local charitable food provisions, the ways in which they did so appeared to produce other social benefits such as:

- the development of new communities
- reducing loneliness
- managing the stigma of accepting charitable donations.

This is supported in the findings from the observations in Phase 1, which revealed themes associated with volunteers, demographics of customers, range of products, perceived level of need, frequency of visits, social aspects and top-up shop experience. Within the interview data, several other themes emerged including volunteers doing good, drivers of demand, emotional links, unforeseen impact, obligations of the state, and sustainability. A significant finding was confirmation that TuS' are perceived to deliver much more than a £2 bag of food and supplies, and the extent to which their work contributes towards the development of new communities, reducing loneliness and improving well-being was evident throughout the research.

The findings from Phase 1 were then used to inform the discussions which took place in Phase 2. Thematic framework analysis was employed to explore the main themes which emerged from these sessions: sustainability; whether the top-up shop model could be considered to be an exemplar in the local context; and how learning from the case study could inform the best way forward in terms of sustaining and developing their services with other local actors.



Findings and proposals

towards a way forward for top-up shops in the local context

The case study findings indicate general agreement that TuS are perceived by organisers, volunteers and customers to be highly effective supporting those in need within their communities and may be considered as an exemplar for the ways in which it does. TuS' site organisers, volunteers and customers perceive that TuS are unique, as is their story, their journey and their birth – something that site organisers wish to retain, following whatever moves they will make in their quest towards sustainability and better collaboration with other services.

However, there are questions relating to their long-term sustainability, leading to a perception among organisers and volunteers that TuS' prospects could be improved through access to more efficient, local, coordinated funding at a strategic level, with collaboration across services and logistics.

- There was a strong sense that organisers and volunteers of TuS perceive that all sources and support should remain local, working together in a local capacity; going beyond the retailers and wholesalers straight to manufacturers and suppliers to enhance their services' sustainability
- It was suggested that considerable work needs to be done in Suffolk to highlight knowledge of 'what works' in services such as TuS and how they can best operate effectively to deliver demonstrable benefits to communities in need
- Further, work is needed to consider how TuS could enhance their service when sufficient support and funding is in place. This would include coordinating collaborations with other services for necessary supplies and to secure funding
- It is recognised that policy development, operation and access to statutory funding derive from Suffolk County Council (SCC). However, for TuS to gain the necessary coordinated support and access to funding would require an increasing understanding among policy makers of the strategic benefit to communities and of the good work being done
- It is perceived that in the long term, such strategic understanding can save the state time and money, as untreated health concerns in the elderly, for example, can increase the need for long-term medical support. There was evidence that some visiting nurses to TuS had identified serious health concerns
- With respect to the 2022 Tackling Poverty in Suffolk report (TPS) from SCC, many of the findings identified within our report are supportive of their principles, like dignity and respect, inclusivity, co-production through lived experience, data-led long-term thinking, and partnership-working
- In terms of governance, the TPS (2022) report references a governance mandate for 'a tackling poverty partnership involving VCSE organisations'. In terms of the TPS priorities, better coordination with TuS could also address aspects of Priorities 1, 3 and 4 mentioned in their report.

Yet there is a national context to issues such as financial insecurity and poverty which led to the requirement for/and the increased demand upon charitable organisations such as the TuS' network, which will be dealt with in the next section.



Introduction

In a report from the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), an independent think tank, titled ‘Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK’ (2023, p.9) it states that ‘the country is deeply divided. There are those who are getting by and those who are not. Those left behind face multiple disadvantages and entrenched poverty... they live in poor quality, expensive, and insecure housing, and they are sick’

Research conducted for the Two Nations report highlighted the significant gap separating those stuck at the bottom of the social structure from those who can manage – a situation caused in part by ‘stagnating wages, poor housing and frayed community life’ (ibid., p.9). This view was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) (2024, p.100) who went on to note that ‘...already-high prices continue to rise while increasing rents and interest rates, along with a deteriorating job market, are increasing the financial pressures on families across the income distribution, but on low-income families in particular’.

Statistics published by GOV.UK (2024) concerning income distribution from 1995 to 2023 claimed that in the year 2022-23, household income fell by 1.5% after housing costs were accounted for. And those at the bottom of the income scale experienced a 2% fall in real terms (conversely this was measured against a small increase in income for those at the top of the scale (GOV.UK, 2024). It is therefore no surprise that Francis-Devine, Malik and Danechi (2023, p.4) recognised in their research briefing to the House of Commons that 7% of the UK population (4.7 million people) were experiencing food poverty, including 12% of children. GOV.UK (2024) data also highlighted a statistically significant increase in pensioners experiencing material deprivation since 2020. This is an important finding in the social context and the demographics within which social enterprises such as TuS are operating and is therefore relevant to findings discussed throughout our report.

It is, then, significant that in the wake of the Treasury Autumn Budget Statement (November 2022) that Sarah Vibert, the CEO of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO,

2022) observed that a decade of austerity measures and a failure to deal with the root causes of food poverty would lead to widening inequality. This observation was supported by the JRF and the CSJ report (Francis-Devine, Malik and Danechi, 2023). It is important to note that Vibert (NCVO, 2022) also commented that many of her members were questioning whether they were allowing the government to continue underfunding public services knowing that charitable and voluntary sectors would step up and fill the gap in provisions, while also making a key point that charitable income cannot replace government funding (NCVO, 2022, p.2).

This latter point is relevant to social enterprises in Ipswich such as TuS, but not exclusively. Indeed, the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown also observed that ‘food banks were taking over from the welfare state’ (Guardian Newspaper, 2023). While Mr Brown may have been making an ideological point, it is important to recognise that there is a distinction between the purpose and criteria for using food banks when compared to TuS. Nevertheless, the wider point concerning funding is crucial to the voluntary sector per se and for the communities they serve. And this was a key issue in the discussions which took place in Phase 2 of our research and developed throughout this report. However, to place all of this in context, it is worth first exploring the historical and socio-economic development of Ipswich as an industrial/post-industrial town within a predominately rural county. This will place TuS’ provision and this research report in a broader context – structurally, socially, politically, and economically.



Local context: a brief history of Ipswich

This section will illustrate how the purpose and value of TuS extends beyond the provision of food to a broader context of developing communities – and particularly within the church itself

The social value of TuS is one of the most significant factors in an environment where the value of other social constructs such as public houses, social clubs and indeed the workplace, have changed. For example, in the workplace, working from home is now prevalent, meaning reduced opportunities for maintaining close social ties locally, as fewer individuals are meeting to look out for one another. Plus, there has been a general drift, politically and economically, away from ideas supportive of welfarism including state support towards the provision of charitable services competing along the lines of market principles, all of which are relevant to this case study. However, it has not always been this way, and the changing face of Ipswich as an industrial town has played a part in its changing social, political and economic fabric.

Ipswich has a history of occupation dating back from 5,000 BC, supported by the presence of archaeological evidence (Twinch, 2008). That said, while there is little documentary evidence of its existence as a town until the 10th century AD (Twinch, 2008) Ipswich claims to be the first town to be founded in Suffolk and Norfolk as the capital of the eastern Angles (East Anglia). A charter was granted to the town by King John in the year 1200, and over the centuries, Ipswich experienced typical economic peaks and troughs (Twinch, 2008).

But it was the arrival of foundry man Robert Ransome to the town in 1785 which was to be influential to Ipswich's future prosperity through increased industrialisation and the rapid growth of local engineering (Ipswich Engineering Society, 1999). The arrival of innovative technologies also brought a requirement for specialist knowledge and skills, leading to the creation of the Mechanics Institute in 1824 and the Orwell Works Foundry Society in 1836

(Ipswich Engineering Society, 1999). Their purpose was to support the growing classes of artisans and mechanics working at the Orwell Foundry works, with premises provided in 1899 by Robert Ransome and the Ipswich Engineering Society (Ipswich Engineering Society, 1999).

This was a clear example of networks and social structures developing within the town which would endure for 150 years, during which time companies such as Ransomes & Rapier, ER & F Turner, Ransomes Sims & Jefferies and Reavells became the town's most successful engineering firms, of regional and national importance, too – employing thousands of local people for over a century until their closure (Ipswich Engineering Society, 1999).

However, this was to change as beginning in the late 1970s and into the '80s, 'white collar' service industries began to arrive in Ipswich (such as the Guardian Royal Exchange Group). The coinciding worldwide decline of traditional, heavy manufacturing industries had a considerable impact on both the local labour force and many businesses reliant on Ipswich's industrial history, with long-lasting adverse social and economic consequences.

In the years that followed, during a period which became known as deindustrialisation, not all UK towns recovered or prospered as well as others. The long-term legacy of economic decline in areas of industrial and manufacturing contraction throughout the late '70s and '80s is still evident today, as the move to the service sector curbed the employment prospects of those living and working there (see Tomlinson, 2021; Crossley, 2017; McDowell, 2003). In particular, the younger generation who are faced with 'poorer economic prospects than their parents did at the same age...' were more

likely to enter low paid, unskilled and unsecured employment (McDowell, 2010, p.389) – which is of high significance to towns such as Ipswich.

In recent research into the lingering effect of deindustrialisation, conducted by Fiorentino, Sielker and Tomaney (2023) a comparative analysis of data arising from case studies was used to exemplify how four coastal towns may be regarded as examples of ‘left- behind places’ – economically, environmentally and from governance and planning processes, and why this may be so. The towns were Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Ipswich on the east coast, and Newhaven in the south-east. Initially citing Blackpool as an example, the study argues that in recent decades many towns have experienced socio-economic decline and deprivation resulting from deindustrialisation occurring since the ‘80s. They highlight several visible factors:

- high unemployment, and/or seasonal employment
- low educational attainment
- outmigration of skilled workers
- nested deprivation
- social isolation
- powerlessness.

But they also highlight that much of the previous research concerning the regeneration of deindustrialised spaces has concentrated on cities and the urban dimension which may have distinct differences to coastal towns, as they face both landward and seaward pressures. This highlights the regional significance of planning and policy developments and an additional focus on local governance structures (Fiorentino et al., 2023).

Fiorentino et al. (2023, p.2) also observed that in towns such as those included in their case study, local policies of deindustrialisation would need to have addressed ‘the specificity of local geographies, characterised by community and civic bonds that provided a strong sense of belonging’. Arguably, Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft have a strong synergy in this respect, arising from the former fishing industry which employed generations of families.

However, these are also important factors of relevance to Ipswich as each of the town’s aforementioned industries had a significant impact on local families because much of their work and social lives were intertwined with the additional provision of sports and social clubs by these industries (Weaver and Weaver, 1989; see also Tony Parker in Red Hill 1986 with reference to other communities outside of Ipswich). These provided locals with a strong sense of identity associated with their town’s former heavy industrial economy.

Elsewhere, a paternalistic approach to workers by their employers from the late 1800s onwards (companies such as Boots Pure Drug and Cadbury’s Bournville) set about enhancing the life of their workers by promoting health and recreational facilities (Long, 2011) against the backdrop of growing pressure from an increasingly vocal labour movement seeking to improve pay and conditions (Cartwright, 2023). Indeed, the motivation for this paternalistic approach (enhanced working conditions, workers loyalty, business needs or philanthropy) is well documented (Long, 2011) and included improving safeguarding and working conditions, while promoting leisure activities such as special interest clubs and social groups – from work outings and choirs to fitness activities including swimming and gymnastics. Companies such as this existed in Ipswich and well-known names such as Ransomes as well as Cranes engendered a sense of community, belonging and support. Indeed, one of the authors of this paper has fond memories of Christmas parties and enjoying the facilities of these social clubs during childhood, all of which fostered a sense of local community.

Intergenerational employment opportunities associated with these industries also extended to family members, which became a feature of their personal identities. These findings were highlighted in research conducted in Ipswich by Agnew and Bond (2013) aimed at understanding employment prospects for young people, many of whom cited the perceived social capital arising from connection to a family member who worked, for example, at Felixstowe docks,

when compared to the hopelessness of several unanswered job applications. Further research conducted by Bond, Manning and James (2015) involving 52 young people in Lowestoft – all long-term unemployed – also revealed many of the factors identified by Fiorentino et al. (2023) and Agnew and Bond (2013). Many of these young people highlighted their accounts of experiencing severe hardship, homelessness, and associated mental health conditions, arising from their perceived poor prospects for employment. Some had experienced several generations of intra-familial unemployment following deindustrialisation and the collapse of the fishing industry. These issues, along with the impact of government policies on housing and changes to benefit entitlement, resonate in the problems experienced by local people today.

As Fiorentino et al. (2023, p.5) state in their study, each of the four towns ‘present pockets of severe deprivation, with more than 25% of their small areas (Lower Super Output Area) included in the 10% of most deprived areas in England... all four towns display a larger than average share of workless households with a high level of people living on different types of benefits’. This is not to say that local governance has not tried to address these issues, but these findings are consistent with data presented in the last ‘Hidden Needs’ report in Suffolk published by Suffolk Community Foundation (Smith and Dogaru, 2020).

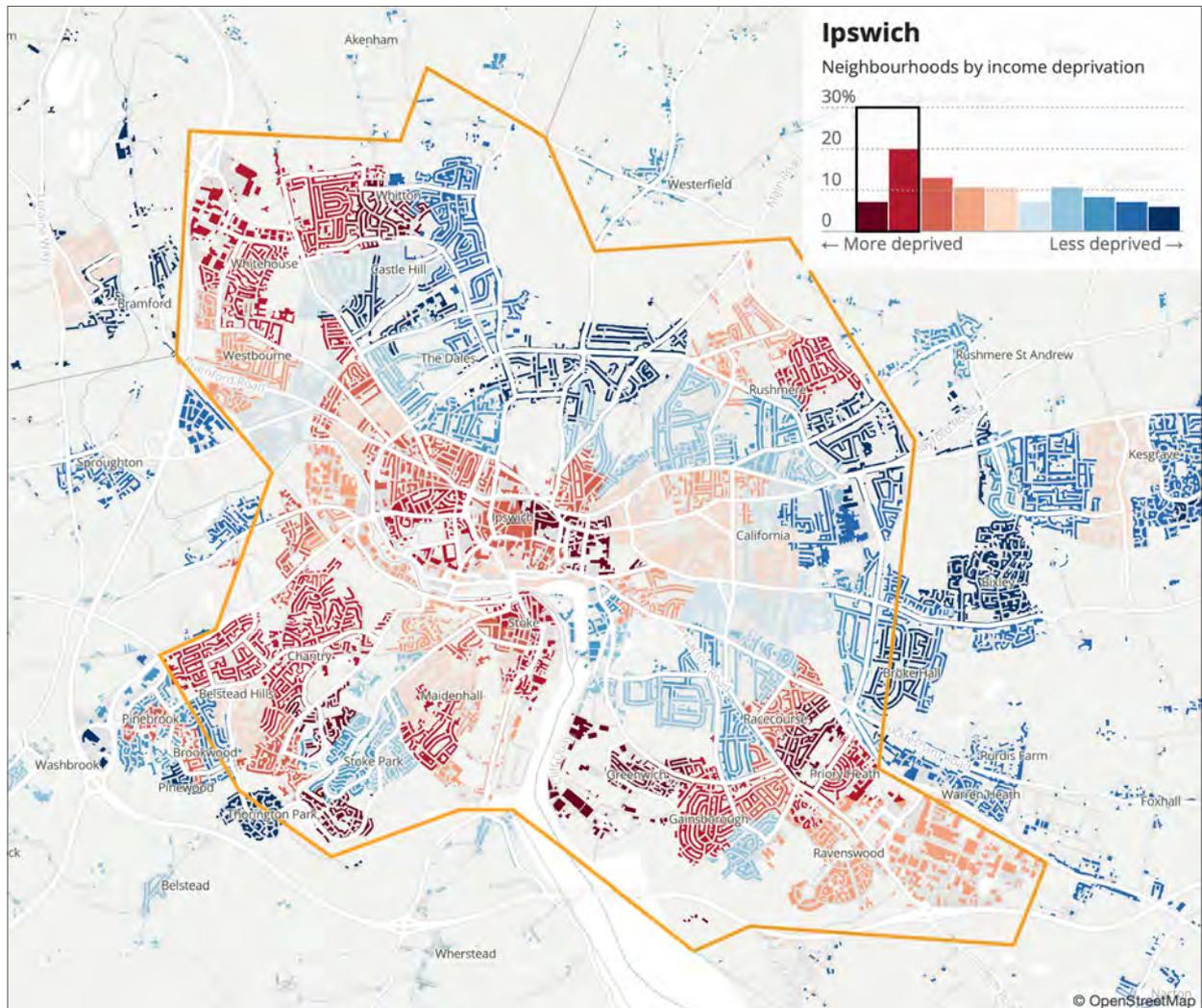
This third iteration of Suffolk Community Foundation’s Hidden Needs study (2020) delved into the intricate nature of deprivation in Suffolk, aiming to shed light on the often-concealed hardships faced by residents. Unlike previous studies that focused on short-term changes from 2007 to 2015, this report provided a comprehensive analysis of deprivation trends from 2007 to 2019. Published amid the Covid-19 pandemic-induced recession, the report emphasises the urgent need for evidence-based strategies to combat deprivation and enhance community resilience. The study identified key drivers of deprivation in Suffolk and introduced a guide to address these issues.

Key findings revealed that while Suffolk was among the 40% least deprived authorities in England, it was not particularly advantaged, either. Over the years, the county has seen an increase in deprived neighbourhoods, with significant deterioration observed during the UK’s last recession. Persistent deprivation was noted in Suffolk’s most deprived areas, while the ‘middle ground’ neighbourhoods have also experienced increased deprivation, indicating a broader impact on household resilience. The report highlighted that 75,000 people in Suffolk live in income deprivation, with urban areas being more affected than rural ones. Additionally, specific indicators of deprivation such as children’s education, access to services, and housing quality remained consistently high in Suffolk. The study also underscored several critical areas of concern:

- income and employment deprivation were notable in Suffolk’s most deprived neighbourhoods, with average wages falling below national levels
- health issues, including higher rates of disability and long-term illness, were prevalent in more deprived districts
- educational deprivation remained disproportionately high despite some improvements, and disadvantaged children in Suffolk performed worse than their counterparts nationally
- crime rates were in line with national trends, but housing quality had declined, particularly in rural areas.

The study also revealed that accessibility of services posed a significant challenge, exacerbating deprivation in less accessible, rural neighbourhoods (Smith and Dogaru, 2020). These findings highlighted the complex and multi-faceted nature of deprivation in Suffolk, necessitating coordinated efforts to address these hidden needs. It also provides considerable context to the issues facing many communities in Ipswich, which is one reason why it may be claimed that TuS alongside other local charities are providing valuable local support.

Figure 1. Income deprivation in Ipswich, IMD 2019. Source: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc1371/#/E07000202>



Within the broader picture of Suffolk, there were several areas where deprivation was more concentrated, of which Ipswich was one. The Hidden Needs report was based mostly on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) which is a comprehensive measure used to assess and compare relative deprivation across small geographical areas known as Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs). The IMD combines data from seven distinct domains, each encompassing various indicators that reflect different aspects of deprivation: income, employment, education, health, crime, barriers to housing and services, and the living environment. These domains collectively provide a comprehensive perspective on the hardships faced by communities.

By ranking all 32,844 LSOAs in England from the most deprived to the least deprived, the IMD enables a nuanced understanding of deprivation. The rankings are often divided into 10 equal groups, or deciles, with the first decile representing the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in England. This detailed ranking system helps policymakers, researchers, and organisations to identify and target areas most in need of support and resources, facilitating more effective and equitable interventions.

In 2019, 14.1% of Ipswich's population was income-deprived, and this trend showed no signs of improvement. Ipswich ranked as the 89th most income-deprived out of 316 local authorities in England (excluding the Isles of Scilly). Within

Ipswich, 23 of its 85 neighbourhoods (LSOAs) were among the 20% most income-deprived in England. The map above illustrates the geographical distribution of income deprivation in Ipswich, revealing significant internal disparities. In the least deprived areas (blue), only 3.1% of residents were income-deprived, while in the most deprived areas (red), this figure rose to 32.7%, resulting in a disparity of 29.6 percentage points across the town.

Ipswich has historically been one of the more deprived areas in Suffolk. Figure 2 shows the percentage of neighbourhoods in Suffolk's districts that ranked among the 10% most deprived in England across different waves of IMD data. Compared to Babergh, Mid Suffolk, and West Suffolk – which have never had neighbourhoods in the bottom decile – Ipswich consistently had over 12% of its neighbourhoods in this category, with an increasing trend. A similar pattern is observed for the income domain of the IMD, as shown in Figure 3.

Despite Ipswich's employment rate generally being above the average for Great Britain and fluctuates around the East of England's rates (Figure 4) gross weekly pay in Ipswich has consistently been below both regional and national averages (Figure 5). Additionally, the proportion of 16-24-year-olds claiming out-of-work benefits has been persistently higher in Ipswich than in Great Britain and the East of England. It is therefore no surprise that TuS which experienced the highest concentration of customers suffering the worst levels of poverty are from the areas indicated in Figure 1 which, according to Smith and Dogaru (2020) are demonstrably ranked among the 10% most deprived in England. This indicates ongoing socio-economic struggles for many residents, highlighting the need for further policy consideration as a matter of social justice. These issues, including food poverty, will be explored further in this report.

Figure 2: Percentage of neighbourhoods in Suffolk's districts among the bottom 10% (most deprived) neighbourhoods in England (across IMD's waves on the overall score)

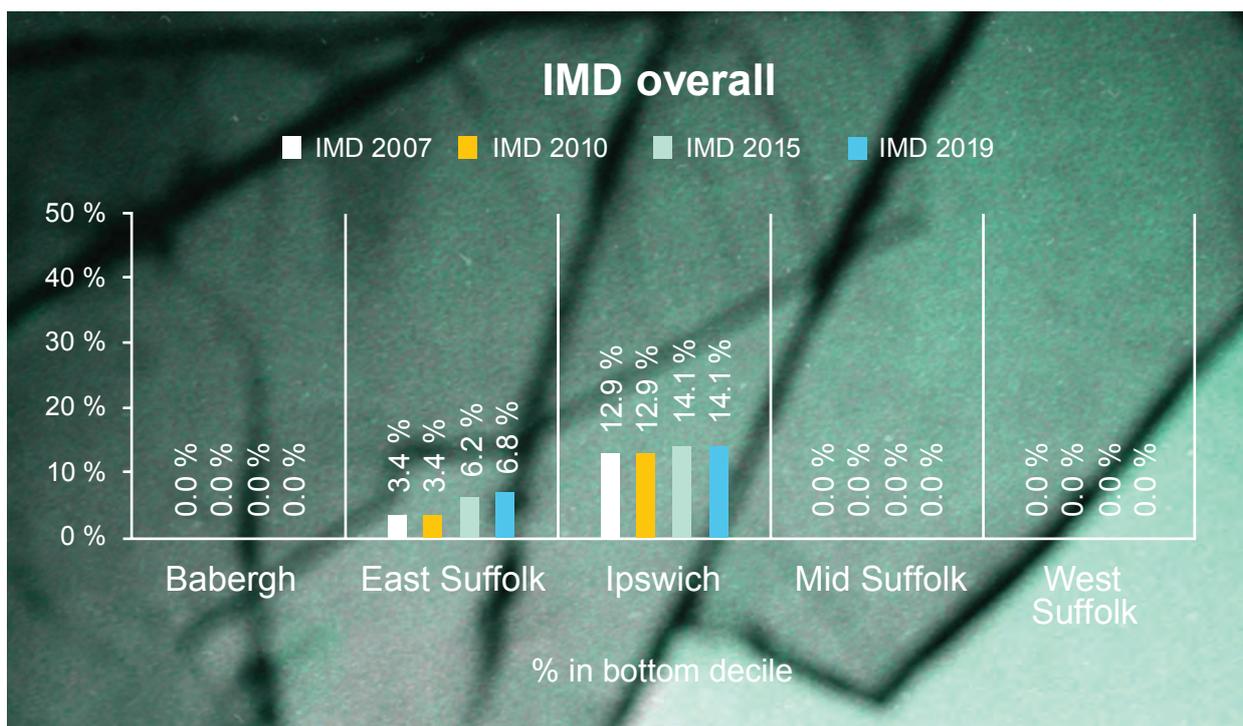


Figure 3: Percentage of neighbourhoods in Suffolk's districts that were in England's bottom 10% (most deprived) neighbourhoods (across IMD's waves on the income domain)

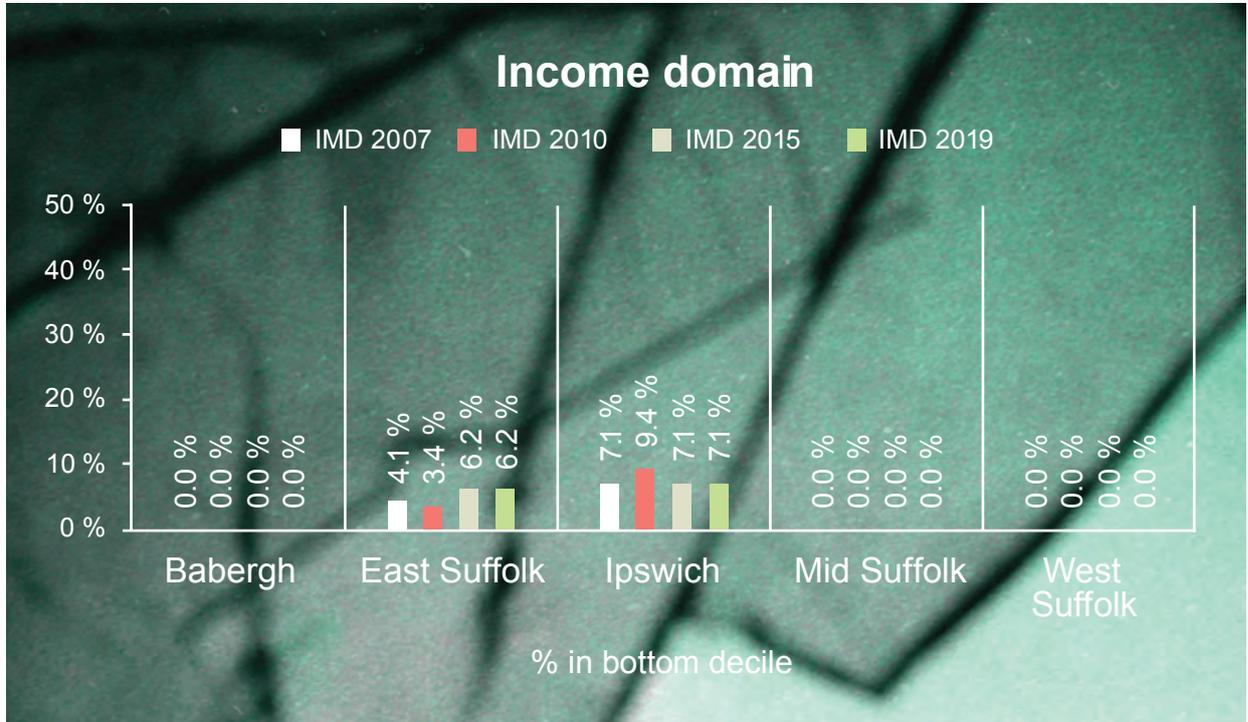


Figure 4: Employment rate (16-64 year olds) in Ipswich compared with Great Britain and East of England

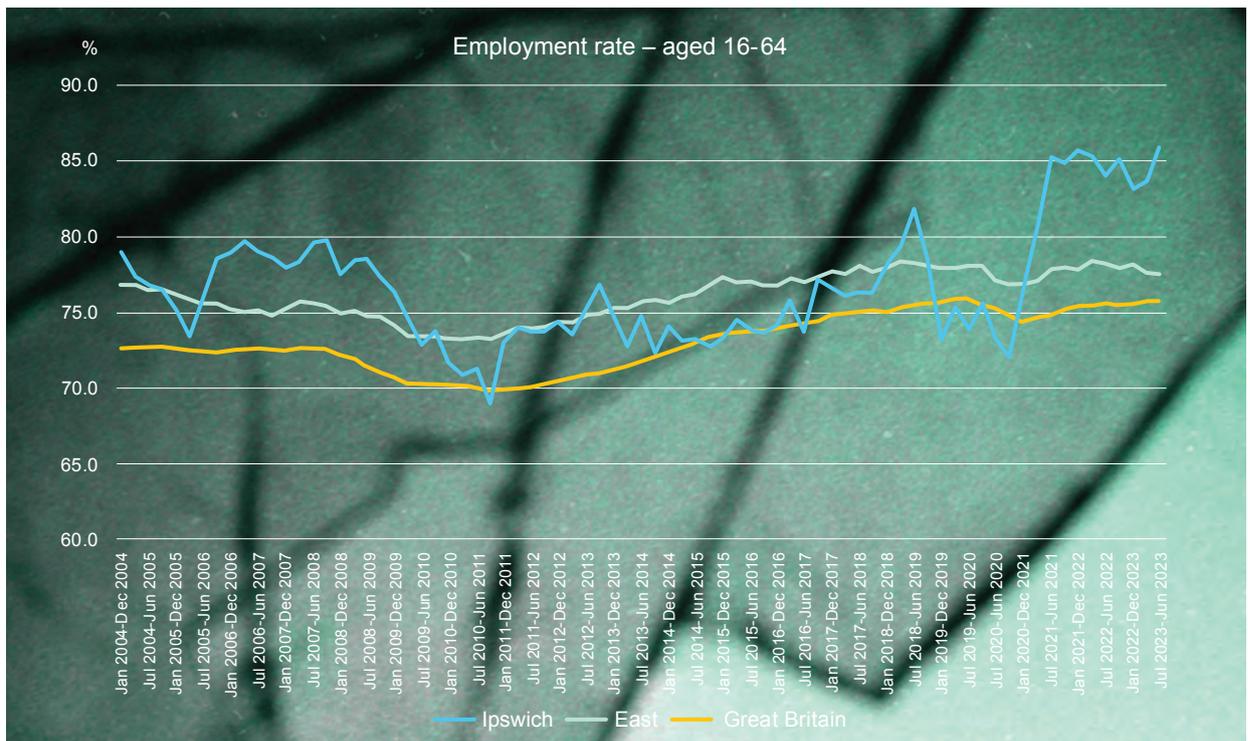
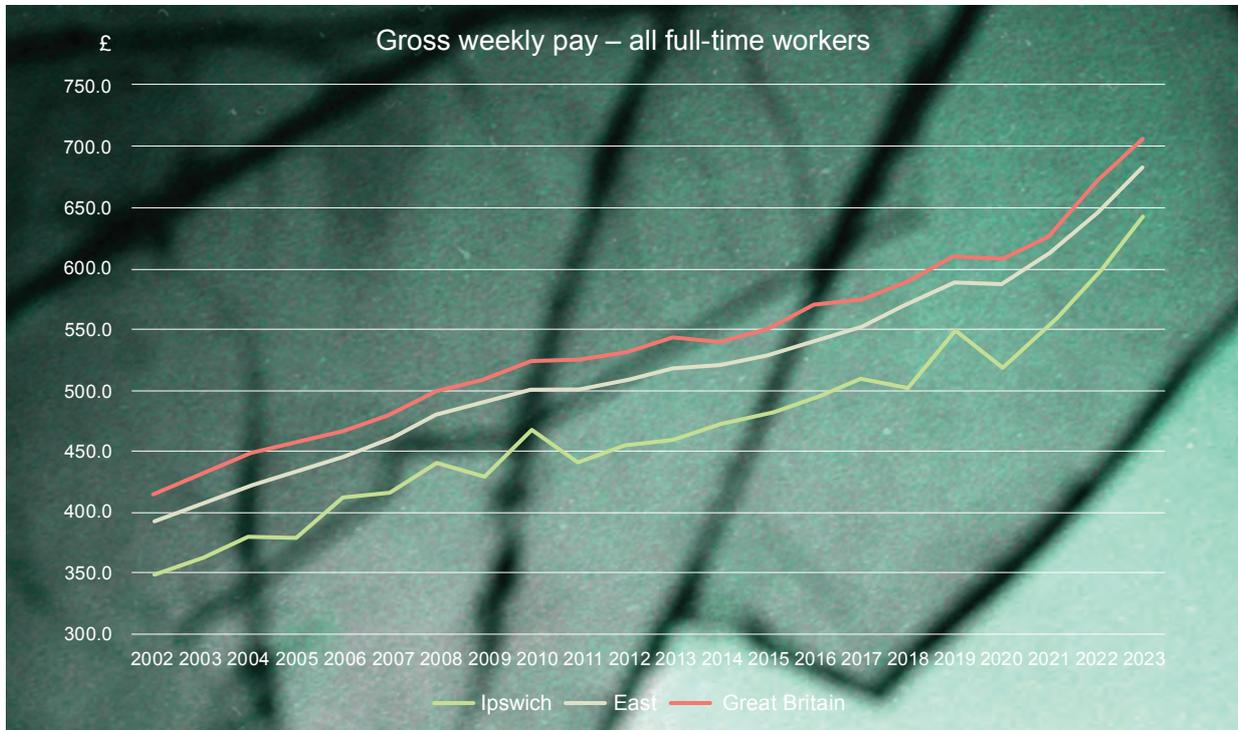


Figure 5: Gross weekly pay in Ipswich compared with Great Britain and East of England (not adjusted for inflation)



Food poverty and the rising cost of living

The Hidden Needs report (Smith and Dogaru, 2020) clearly highlights the challenges facing the residents of Ipswich and Suffolk with several critical areas of concern. As cited by Smith and Dogaru (2020) income and employment deprivation are notable in Suffolk's most deprived neighbourhoods, with average wages falling below national levels. Health issues, including higher rates of disability and long-term illness, are also prevalent in more deprived areas. However, there is little doubt that cost of living increases throughout Europe have also impacted upon household food insecurity (Hebinck, Galli, Arcuri, Carroll, O'Connor and Oostindie, 2018) with families responding by eating less, adjusting the quality of their food, or seeking support from elsewhere (Francis-Devine et al., 2023) and with women identified as being at particular risk of poverty (Pautz and Dempsey, 2022).

Francis-Devine et al. (2003, p.4) noted the absence of a single definition of 'food poverty or insecurity' but in the main it can be described as unable to access 'an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways'. The Centre for Social Justice report (2023, p.9) highlights how over a two-year period between 2021 and 2023, consumer goods such as food increased in price by 28% having previously risen by the same amount over a 13-year period from 2008 to 2021. Hebinck et al. (2018) also suggested that the problem is not a lack of food supply but a direct result of the economic downturn. That said, the situation is dynamic and, according to the Independent Food Aid Network (2023) they heard concerns from two thirds of suppliers that due to increased demand in 2023 they would need to consider reducing their level of support. They cited data from independent food banks which reported a bleak picture with food bank organisers deeply concerned about the growing number of people with nowhere else to turn.

While Ipswich TuS would not be classed as food banks per se, there was evidence of previously reliable suppliers such as supermarkets reducing their level of support. This has caused fractures in the supply chain to TuS, which was an issue explored in Phase 2 of this research. Indeed, it was acknowledged that the demand on TuS may become greater because food banks require the user to demonstrate to a gatekeeper evidence of their level of need or 'deservedness' (Beck and Gwilym, 2020) while TuS receive everyone as 'friends in need' and respond accordingly. In Phase 2 of the research there was also anecdotal evidence of statutory bodies referring individuals in need to TuS for support.

This context is significant because in a research briefing including an independent assessment of the UK government's Food Strategy 2020 (Francis et al., 2023) there appears little to commend the government's recommendations to those at risk of food insecurity/poverty and in need of immediate support. According to Francis et al. (2023, p.12) the government's food strategy – aimed at long-term planning to cover 'the entire food chain from field to fork' – received mixed reaction from the food industry. Organisations such as The Local Government Association, The Food Foundation, as well as the Food and Drink Association claimed the report had 'missed the mark', and in particular, by failing to incentivise the industry to produce affordable nourishing food in a financial climate where those living in poverty are at a higher risk of associated health issues arising from poor diets.

The report also highlighted concerns that food banks, which are predominately run by charities, are not intended to effect long-term solutions to household food insecurity (Francis et al., 2023, p.15). This point resonates with observations made by Vibert (NCVO, 2022) concerning food poverty and widening inequality. Therefore, in the absence of more structural support, food bank usage is likely to increase in the short term (Beck and Gwilym, 2020) leading to the supply chain issues experienced by TuS, as reported elsewhere by the NCVO (2022) and more recently, the Trussell Trust. In Suffolk, the Tackling Poverty in Suffolk

policy has been developed by Suffolk County Council with four key priorities aimed to address poverty, to be discussed later in this report.

According to the Trussell Trust, a charity which runs a network of 1300 food banks in the UK and which also provides emergency food parcels (Trussell Trust, October 2023) they were bracing for the worst winter yet – anticipating that between December 2023 and February 2024, they would provide more than one million emergency food parcels – the highest number they will have reached during this period. This equates to providing one food parcel every eight seconds to an average of 7,000 people daily. Though financed from charitable donations through their network of shops and online activity, a pressing question remains: how sustainable is this model and what impact is there upon those service users who are required to demonstrate their level of deservedness to gain access to the service? As Beck and Gwilym (2020) observed, if all requests for help were met by ready acceptance, the service would crash. However, their research also highlights another area of concern, this being the considerable levels of stigma experienced by service users and providers, too, who recognise the loss of dignity and despair faced by those in need of help.

Therefore, questions could reasonably be asked concerning the extent to which the state has an obligation to support civic and charitable food providers and communities of self-help, and to reframe the debate as a social justice issue. However, the trajectory of government policy since the 1980s has not been wholly supportive of this notion and especially so in respect of the decline of the welfare state. Curry (2022, p.258) cites Prochaska (2014) who highlights that 'One of the principles of welfarism was that there would be no need for a community sector if the needs of society and the state were coincident'. The evolution of policies such as 'the 'Third Way' [Blair, 1997-2007] and the 'Big Society' [Cameron, 2010-2016] were intended to encourage a return to citizenship as well as to provide infrastructures supported by funding for community action (Curry, 2022, p.258).

Yet, as Curry (2022) goes on to argue, these policies were contingent upon the community sector working towards the aims of the state in return for funding, which inevitably led to the marketisation of the community sector, the consequences of which are evident in the narrative throughout this report.

Community food provision as a social justice issue

In his highly regarded ‘Theory of Justice’, Rawls (1971, p.7) laid out the central tenets for social justice principles that, in a well-ordered society, would inform a fair distribution of goods among its members. Rawls argues in relation to social structures that ‘institutions of society favour certain starting places over others’. He then goes on to say that ‘These are especially deep inequalities. Not only are they pervasive but they affect men’s [sic] initial chances in life... it is these inequalities, presumably inevitable in the basic structure of any society, to which the principles of social justice must in the first instance apply’ (p.7 *ibid.*).

However, in the 21st century, while discussions around social justice have become a regular discourse in contemporary society, there does not appear to be a consistently used definition. Nevertheless, there does appear to be general agreement that it assumes fair, equal and/or equitable distribution of vital domains such as health, welfare, education, respect to its members, as well as equitable outcomes. A government report titled *Social Justice: Transforming Lives* (2012, p.4) suggested its purpose ‘is about making society function better – providing the support and tools to help turn lives around’.

That said, as this paper is highlighting, social justice in practice presents some deficiencies in reaching its stated aims. For example, a November 2022 report from HM Treasury (2022A) revealed a consumer price index of 10.1% with the potential to impact further upon families who were already experiencing a

steadily rising cost of living. A subsequent HM Treasury Autumn Statement (HM Treasury, 2022B) linked the war in Ukraine to a surge in energy prices – driving high inflation across the world – causing central banks to raise interest rates to get inflation under control. The International Monetary Fund also predicted that a third of the global economy would soon fall into recession. In the UK, it was reported that in the year 2021-22, 4.7 million people, or 7% of the population, were already experiencing food poverty (Francis-Devine, Malik and Danechi, 2023) with a likely outcome from these assessments being that communities would be required to be more self-supporting as fiscal policies tightened. However, these suggestions lead to questions concerning how best to address some of the inevitable inequalities associated with food poverty (Beck and Gwilym, 2020).

Arguably, from a social justice perspective, any cuts made by HM Treasury would also have a disproportionate effect on the poorest communities in society, fostering perceptions of a lack of fairness in the sense that Rawls (1971) conceived it, and placing a greater burden on both charitable and welfare institutions to provide more relief. Smith and Dogaru (2020) provide direct evidence of long-term decline in Suffolk where ‘persistent deprivation is noted in Suffolk’s most deprived areas, while the “middle ground” neighbourhoods have also experienced increased deprivation, indicating a broader impact on household resilience’.

Shannahan (2019, p.243) observed that poverty is a form of ‘structural and cultural violence within a discourse of blaming those living in poverty for being poor’. It is of interest that he further observes how the church has an increasing role to play in the politics of civil society from which the state has withdrawn. As a practical example, institutions such as the church have continuously fulfilled a pastoral role, but they are likely to be in greater demand and, possibly, to take a more leading role. As Beck and Gwilym (2020, pp.384-385) observed in respect of food banks, ‘a whole industry has evolved in support of not just food, but also

through the donation of voluntary time and coordination, delivery, referral, management, and partnerships.’ They also cite May (2014) for the assertion that UK foodbanks are premised on a religious dictum of providing unconstrained help. And Denning (2021) also highlights how faith-based volunteers are playing a crucial role in UK welfare provisions.

The religious analogy is interesting here because TuS discussed in this paper were conceived, managed, and housed within a geographical church estate which few organisations other than the church would be better placed to provide. Although this is not without a sense of irony as in the 21st century, communities are often regarded as being increasingly secular (Taylor, 2018 p.2) in which ‘public spaces have been allegedly emptied of God’.

In terms of developing communities of self-help, the words of Taylor (2018) resonate here, as the formational framework of the Anglican Church requires ordained ministers to demonstrate a sense of mission and evangelism within local communities, and the practices of TuS were wholly consistent with this mission (Formation Criteria for Ordained Ministry, 2014). Although it is recognised that this model of ‘community food’ self-help is not unique, or without its own challenges, as Curry (2022) observes, such models seem to be able to work around neoliberal economic systems of marketisation, even if they provide inadequate measures of community development and food supply (Curry, 2022).

Nonetheless, it is argued here that there is much to commend models of community self-help. But the principles of social justice require them to be better supported nationally as well as by the local infrastructure, including local government. Indeed, it can produce many benefits, examples of which from TuS included open access to NHS community nurses for health checks, financial guidance, as well as education and training in self-support. The education in self-support developed using (externally funded) pressure cookers and cooking classes used to prepare nutritious food

made from products supplied by TuS. These are examples of wrap-around support, a term first coined in 1986 by Dr Lenore Behar, and which has become a common feature in how the public and third sector offer additional non-traditional services that align or overlap with their own.

The nature of wrap-around services will be discussed further in the policy discussion in Phase 2 as they appeared to be key to the future success of community self-help services such as TuS, and which also exemplify why networking and collaboration are also essential. However, this raises questions concerning governance, sustainability, coordination, funding support and the development of local policy, the importance of which is presented in the discussions in Phase 2 of this study.

Ipswich Top-up Shops as an exemplar of community food provision

The genesis of Ipswich TuS was in Felixstowe where a social enterprise known as ‘Pop-Up Shops’ were originally launched by the Basic Life Charity. The model was later adopted in Ipswich having evolved through the COVID 19 lockdown period in 2020-2021. During this time, staff and volunteers of the Anglican Churches in Ipswich recognised that some parishioners were experiencing food insecurity and would benefit if the churches could provide somewhere to get affordable food without the need for referral (Church of England Suffolk, 2022). At the time of this study there were a total of 11 TuS operating within churches across the town. These were:

- All Hallows
- St Mary Le Tower
- Triangle Church
- St Mary and St Botolphs
- St Peters
- St Johns
- St Matthews
- Safe Harbour
- St Thomas the Apostle
- St Francis with St Clare and St Mary’s
- St Mary’s Stokes.

Each of these were working in partnership with the charity FareShare, with support from Suffolk County Council, local supermarkets and food suppliers, and each staffed by a volunteer workforce. According to Denning (2021, p.59) the benefits and involvement of organisations such as the church in voluntary enterprises like TuS can be understood around three themes:

- **space**, with the uneven distribution of voluntary sector welfare provision
- **place**, as voluntary sector provision is affected by where it is taking place
- the **political context**, as voluntary sector provision is increasingly in the context of the retreating welfare state.

In doing so, a relational context is also developed between volunteers, service users and organisations alike and to their wider environments (Denning, 2021). This will be discussed in more detail in the findings but there was a very clear sense among volunteers and users of TuS that they were aware of the space, place and political contexts discussed by Denning (2021). These contexts acted as the catalyst to create, engage and advance the ethos of the TuS service through some difficult times, with several service users eventually becoming volunteers.

Arguably, developing communities of self-help such as TuS has been both a positive and necessary endeavour in the light of many years of austerity measures. As stated earlier, Curry (2022, p.258) highlights that the reduction of the welfare state since the 1980s has inevitably led communities towards policies of citizenship and community action with former Prime Ministers Tony Blair and David Cameron's policies of the 'Third Way' and 'Big Society' cited as examples. However, Curry (2022, p.258) also observes that ideas of community development and 'self-care' now run along the lines of market principles, where notions of community action become marketed as 'community entrepreneurship' and brings with it all the problems associated with market competition. There was evidence of this marketisation of voluntary and charitable services within Suffolk where TuS are situated.

For this reason, we argue that, as TuS and other local charities compete for access to support from a supply chain which is also in competition for the delivery of a service to them, there is a danger for those in poverty or in need of their service that they may lose their identity and dignity to a broader category of charitable consumers. It is significant that maintaining dignity was central to the provision of the TuS' service and one of the reasons that customers were invited to pay a nominal £2 donation for their bag of supplies. In common with Beck and Gwilym (2020) Psarikidou, Fielden and Reynolds (2019) recognised the stigma associated with using services such as food banks, and their research conducted in the North of England explored the potential for more inclusive local food hubs, such as TuS, to address the stigma associated with conventional food banks. Lucas et al. (2014) also highlighted there has long been a social stigma attached to using in-kind vouchers in welfare provision particularly in relation to the purchase of food (see also Contini and Matteo 2012).

Even so, despite the good intention of local food hubs changing the environment by adapting physical space and by deploying strategies and training intended to reduce or manage stigma, the underlying cause of food poverty is in and of itself stigmatising and reduces the overall effect. However, Rotenberg, Surman and McGrath (2021) observed that strategies which include the provision of food in community settings had other benefits, such as the capacity to reduce loneliness as they promote social contact and cohesion. This was certainly observed in the TuS to the point that new communities were visibly being created across most of the sites. The benefits to those volunteering in the TuS was also recorded, and in a number of cases they, themselves, had sought assistance prior to becoming a volunteer. The benefits of volunteering have been acknowledged in academic literature not only in relation to an individual's health and well-being, but also psychologically, physically and socially (Nichol, Wilson, Rodrigues & Haighton, 2023).

The question remains concerning how these communities of self-help can be better supported within a local infrastructure in order to produce the many potential benefits, including open access to other services who could avail themselves of access to hard-to-reach communities – services that could include NHS community nurses for health checks, financial guidance and access to digital services as well as education and training in self-support.

Implications for policy

At this point, discussion about policy at both national and local levels become relevant to the broad topic of food poverty and poverty in general so that policy can be developed which is capable of both reducing poverty as well as providing a workable solution to provisions such as the TuS network. However, there are tensions to be considered here in terms of whose responsibility it is to develop and/or operationalise such policy. Earlier references to deep divisions in the country cited in the report *Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK* (Centre for Social Justice, 2023) suggest that this is a problem experienced nationally. This observation is supported by Francis-Devine, Malik and Danechi (2023) in their briefing to the House of Commons, which seems to place some responsibility at a national level. However, if this is so, Vibert (2022) raises clear concerns that her organisation which represents members of voluntary organisations nationally, are being expected to fill the gap caused by the underfunding of public services, and this is a key issue to be addressed.

The Trussell Trust, one of the largest charitable services in this sector, placed this debate in context with their projections of the level of demand to be placed upon them during the winter 2023-4 (Trussell Trust, 2023). The Independent Food Aid Network (2023) also raised concerns regarding the increased levels of support expected from them. However, if, at a local level, voluntary organisations such as TuS and other charities are being called upon to shore-up deficiencies in the provision

of support from the state, which seems to be the case, then concerns raised by Curry (2022) and others become highly relevant. Specifically, that local charitable services are required to run along the lines of market principles with the associated problems of market competition by competing with each other for limited pots of funding on a piecemeal basis. It will become clear when reading the findings from the policy sessions discussed later in this report, that this is the perception of those involved but among these organisations, there exists considerable expertise and a willingness to improve local policy and practice.

Local government

In relation to local government, a report from the Health Foundation (Page and Marshall, 2023) raises two key points of relevance to this report:

- local government has an important role to play in increasing food security in their local populations. But to enable this, national government must provide sufficient and sustainable funding to enable long-term planning of preventative approaches. National government action is also needed across relevant departments and with the food industry to create a food system that provides affordable, accessible and nutritious food for everyone in the UK, while also benefitting the economy and the environment
- to inform effective action at national and local level, there is a need to build the evidence base about 'what works' in practice, both to prevent food insecurity and to support those affected by it.

These two points are now briefly considered in respect of SCC's TPS report (2022) and then further developed under Sustainability on page 49 of this report.

In the report *Tackling Poverty in Suffolk* (2022) it is recognised that Suffolk has slightly lower levels of people living in poverty than the UK average. That said, the report also recognises

the risks to health, well-being and life chances for those living in poverty and relative poverty. In context, it should also be remembered that reports from Fiorentino et al. (2023) and Smith and Dogaru (2020) indicate that Ipswich and some other pockets in Suffolk have levels of deprivation ranked amongst the top 10% in the UK. The TPS report also suggests that Suffolk has been awarded additional funding as part of the government's 'Levelling Up Strategy'. The TPS report (2022, p.29) signposts the good work conducted by them with wider system partners since the pandemic and in particular: Home but Not Alone service, Local Welfare Assistance Scheme, Household Support Fund and with FareShare to supply local food banks and Pop-Up shops. They also cite their own priorities which seek to address poverty in Suffolk from crisis management to prevention of poverty through four key areas:

- emergency support
- increasing incomes and reducing costs
- well-being and life chances
- preventing poverty.

These priorities will be considered later in this report in the context of the research findings from Phases 1 and 2.

Summary

This research was built upon historical work conducted at UoS around Hidden Needs and Social Enterprise research. The co-produced nature of the research design allowed the voices of the community to be reflected in the research activities as well as in the narratives they bring to the output – demonstrating clear impact in the community as evidenced by principles 1, 2 and 3 in Planning for Research Impact (Reed, 2018). The project also provided another important opportunity to demonstrate the social and political capital of the UoS by widening its reach into communities, fostering trust and demonstrating its value to the wider community:

'The University of Suffolk has at the heart of its mission, a responsibility to be a model for a new type of civic university – embedded, influential and a focus of societal and economic change in all the communities it serves. Our network is reaching out to communities locally... Our community engagement is about communicating and sharing knowledge, consulting and collaborating with the local community, enriching cultural life and providing a service to our communities...' Community impact and engagement, University of Suffolk.



Methodology and methods

Co-design

Co-design production principles of ‘creating, delivering, improving and evaluating services jointly with people who will use them and stakeholders...’ (Woodall et al., 2019, p.6) guided the overall work (Phases 1 and 2) with an initial ideation session held in January 2023. Attending were various local third sector stakeholders who worked in food provision (both salaried and volunteers). From the session it was agreed that a case study approach using Anglican churches’ TuS would be the focus of the research, given their work around food poverty, with access as a case study area. At the centre of the work was the drive for a partnership approach whereby the research was informed, shaped, and developed alongside those with a stake in the local area’s food security, to improve the quality of the research output and its impact (NIHR, 2021).

Like Phase 1, the co-design principles also applied to Phase 2, which consisted of three policy sessions held in February 2024. The research design was participatory in pursuit of knowledge creation and to extend case study impact beyond the initial scope of the research towards:

- the volunteering and wider community
- local business
- local government
- third sector organisations
- policy makers.

The emphasis of Phase 2 gave greater focus to the impact of the Phase 1 research in relation to themes surrounding sustainability, and the way forward for TuS’ services. According to Reed (2018) impact should be founded upon

evidence-based principles, conceived from the outset from the initial research idea and planned for in the research design (see Ipswich Top-up Shops as an exemplar of community food provision; page 20). One of the key drivers to both the initial research dissemination conference in May 2023 and the policy symposiums in 2024 was to ensure a broader application of findings was disseminated to the public (which included all of the stakeholders above) rather than the more typical academic audience, in order to ‘engage with non-academic actors to generate “usable” knowledge that benefits society’ – in this case, in a local and national context (Reichard et al., 2020 p.2).

The government’s food strategy was published in 2022 and was met with a mixed response by those who had an interest, including the Food Foundation and the Local Government Association. In light of this, further research funding was obtained from Research UKRI to undertake a series of policy symposiums to explore sustainability and long-term funding of TuS, the exemplar model of TuS and the opportunity for networking in the local area.

The section below outlines in further detail the methodological framework and methods of data collection for Phase 1 (Research Case Study) and Phase 2 (Policy Symposiums) separately, as well as ethical considerations for Phase 1. There will also be mention of the research design in relation to impact.

Phase One: Research Case Study

Phase 1 study design was broadly informed by an interpretivist and social constructionist framework, in that knowledge and understanding of what was happening at the research sites was derived from exploring meanings and interpretations through observations and interviews (Danermark, Ekström, and Karlsson, 2019; Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Therefore, by the nature of the research and its aims it was qualitative in its approach.

Participant recruitment

An initial ideation session was held in January 2023 with various local third sector stakeholders who worked in food provision. From this session it was agreed that a case study approach reviewing Anglican churches' TuS would be the research's focus. Having gained consent from church leaders to conduct the research, the research team visited 10 sites over a 12-week period from March to June 2023. All TuS were visited on multiple occasions by the research team. Gatekeeper access to the sites was important (Davies and Francis 2018) so that purposeful participant recruitment was achieved by interviewing organisers and volunteers of the service itself.

Interview participants included males and females across a range of ages from 18 to 70+. Demographic profiles also varied, including individuals who lived alone, lived with a significant other, had children at home, were on maternity leave, worked full time/part time (and/or had a significant other that worked full time/part time) as well as those in receipt of a state pension.

Ipswich has a strong representation of refugee/asylum seekers who were visible and well engaged in TuS, but regrettably did not engage in the research. However, through weekly visits to observe TuS in action, participants were recruited in what McLaughlin and Muncie (2001, p.25) noted as a productive way to include 'volunteer sampling', whereby the researcher makes an initial contact with

one person and then is introduced to others. Informed consent was gained from the owners and operators of the premises and the individual research participants (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, and Ormston, 2014).

Design and Data Collection Methods

Observations

Undertaking observations in the TuS was an essential element of the study and was conducted across all sites by the researchers, on multiple occasions totalling 40 hours. Logging observations and then analysing the data identified practices, procedures and encounters that were typical and widespread, as well as those that were more akin to a particular site (Becker and Geer, 1982). Furthermore, as Madden (2010) argued by 'seeing' in real time, it is possible to garner data which may not necessarily be provided by interviews alone, and it can offer additional validation to the data collected by other methods (Burgess, 1991) such as:

- discreet non-verbal as well as the observable characterological displays of welcoming
- participants' empathy and gratitude
- demographic data on those attending that was not collected by the churches (young families, guardians with children, the elderly and minority groups).

The observed resistance of some social groups was a good example of this, as well as more practical issues such as different queuing systems, the organisation and running of the shops.

Interviews

In total, 20 qualitative in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted across all sites with church representatives, customers and top-up shop volunteers (including some who were also customers). A key strength of interviews is that they can elicit rich and vivid data as well as 'accurate inclusive accounts from informants that are based on personal experiences' (Palmer, 1928, cited in Burgess 1991, p.107; Madden, 2010, p.70). Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted at university premises, church halls and in a small number of volunteers' homes. Interview schedules were designed to ensure the research could capture the essence of volunteering dynamics, customers' perceptions of the shops, the practicalities of running TuS, as well as sustainability. Interviews were confidential, participants' data anonymised (including using pseudonyms) and stored securely with consent. The interviews were transcribed and checked by the researchers for accuracy and uploaded into ATLAS.ti (2023) for analysis.

Analysis

A thematic framework was used to analyse the collected data in both Phase 1 and 2 to consider the emerging themes (Charmaz, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Using such a framework enabled robust data management and organisation by firstly reviewing the fieldwork data (interviews, observation and discussion at the symposiums) and identifying themes and sub-themes (Spencer et al., 2014). The data was coded using analytical software ATLAS.ti and Excel spreadsheets. The main issues which emerged from the Phase 1 data analysis are outlined in Findings on pages 31-57.

Ethics

This project received approval from the University ethics committee in March 2023, prior to the fieldwork starting. The University hold researchers to the highest professional standards and adheres to the Economic and Social Research Councils ethical framework (see <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics>). Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research, ensuring the protection of the researchers and participants. Any potential ethical issues were addressed before commencement of the data collection. Observations were approved by the TuS' lead as well as the location lead.

All participants involved in an interview were given an information sheet, to leave them fully aware of the study's purpose. They were also provided with a paper consent form to sign and keep if they agreed to take part. Each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity throughout the interview and any write-up. Paper documents were stored in a locked cupboard and interview data was stored privately on a UoS password-protected device to maintain confidentiality.

Funding

The research was funded by an internal University Innovation grant originating from UKRI to explore issues of social justice in a rural county town in East Anglia.

Conflict of interest

There are no identified conflicts of interest.



Phase Two: Policy symposiums

Phase 2 involved three policy symposiums. Each one was developed so that strategic decision makers from different local organisations could come together to discuss policy level issues in relation to TuS and their broader network. A range of local charities involved in food poverty provision, food provision funders, local council representatives and politicians, volunteers from the TuS and church clergy were invited to attend all three symposiums. And so, each symposium had a specific focus:

- developing sustainability
- engendering mutual relationships
- working with policy makers.

The symposiums were held at the University of Suffolk as a neutral location and lasted around three hours each. Overall, there were 33 participants (including the research team) across the three events. Attendees detail can be found in Appendix 1. Throughout the sessions, conversations were semi-structured in nature with researchers posing several questions relating to the specific symposium session's focus (as outlined above) but allowing the individuals involved to lead the discussions in directions which they felt were important (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The sessions were designed around concerns raised by those involved in TuS and related to findings from Phase 1, but crafted so that they enabled collaboration across multiple agencies, supported by experiential data.

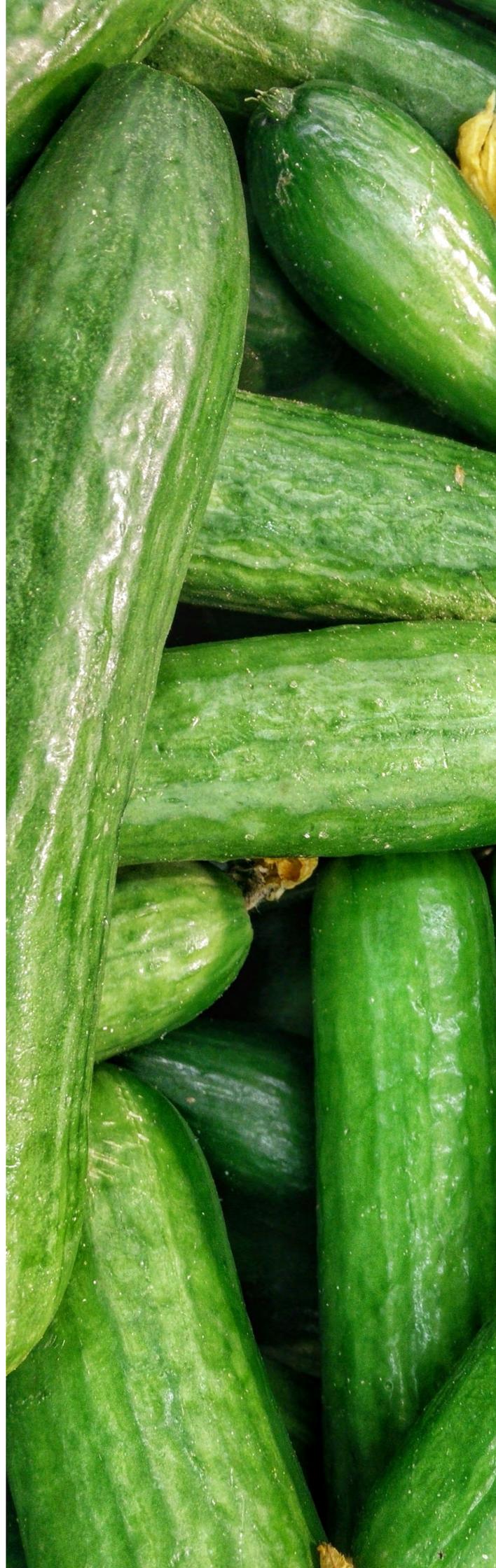
Across the three symposiums, issues such as TuS' sustainability, the exemplary nature of TuS in the local context and what does the funding landscape look like short/medium/long-term for food provision became evident as important areas for consideration. Three main questions emerged as a result:

- a) what options are available to provide a continued and sustainable delivery of TuS?
- b) where do TuS sit in the context of local policy, such as the Suffolk County Council report 'Tackling Poverty in Suffolk, 2022'?
- c) what are the local policy levers to do so (Tackling Poverty in Suffolk, 2022)?

Conceiving impact as a design principle

The use of case studies to 'measure the scope and importance of research impact on broader society beyond academia, including their impact on culture, the economy, and public policy' is deemed a noteworthy design principle (Reichard et al., 2020 p.10). Therefore, adopting such an approach in this research was important with the following principles, drawn from Reed (2018) guiding the work. To achieve the declared outcomes listed below, impact as a design principle was adopted throughout from the initial ideation session, the fieldwork research, and the symposium events:

- **Principle 1:** know the impact you want to achieve and design impact into your research
- **Principle 2:** systematically represent the needs and priorities of those who may be interested in the research
- **Principle 3:** develop long-term, two-way and trusting relationships with those who will use your research
- **Principle 4:** manage expectations concerning what will be considered to be impact and the time period in which this is expected to result
- **Principle 5:** keep track of 'what works' in order to maximise knowledge exchange.





Findings

The key findings from Phase 1, including both observation and interview data, are presented together. Phase 2 findings are presented separately, illustrating the key findings from the three policy symposiums which have the greatest potential for impact upon policy development. All aspects are considered equally important to fully explore the need, impact and sustainability of TuS

Phase 1

Phase 1 involved both observations of TuS and 20 interviews with church representatives, TuS' customers and volunteers. Observations were made across the 10 top-up shop sites and totalled 40 hours. Thematic analysis was employed to explore the observation data. As discussed on page 27, this enabled the researchers to collate experiences while looking for themes and patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Seven themes appeared consistently across the researchers' accounts. The bulleted list below provides a breakdown of the themes and the associated sub-themes found during analysis – presented in the order they are discussed. Where possible, individual voices have been provided in the form of quotes to support the researchers' findings – which have been referred to for the observations.

The discussion that follows takes a thematic approach used to illustrate the established presence and relevance of TuS in Ipswich, from the lived experience of the participants and from research observations. It would be impossible to discuss all of the data gathered for this case study in minute detail, so the themes presented below are those which analysis revealed as being the most significant, including:

- Anglican Church involvement
- food supply and range of products
- who uses TuS
- take-home value of a £2 bag
- stigma
- top-up shop experience
- drivers of demand
- volunteers
- unforeseen impact
- emotional links and well-being
- sustainability
- obligations of the state.

Please note that key themes that emerged in the research data became the focus of the Phase 2 policy symposiums.

The Top-up Shop Anglican Church Involvement

Throughout this report, reference has been made to literature, policy and practices which illustrate that there are many ways in which charitable and voluntary services are working towards helping communities where poverty is having the greatest negative impact. This is certainly the case in Ipswich. Despite the positive efforts being made, concerns have also been raised by Vibert (NCVO, 2022, p.2) that a decade of austerity measures and a failure to deal with the root causes of food poverty would lead to widening inequality – observations supported by the CSJ report and Francis-Devine, Malik and Danechi (2023).

Further, many members of the NCVO were questioning whether they were allowing the government to continue underfunding public services knowing that the charitable and voluntary sectors would step up and fill the gap in provisions, while also making a key point that charitable income cannot replace government funding.

Fiorentino et al. (2023) suggest that some of the issues facing residents in Ipswich and other similar towns are historic, emanating from the beginning of deindustrialisation in the 1970s, with its concomitant effect upon employment prospects. Within their report they cite recent data connected to health and disabilities which would also potentially impact upon employment capability amongst the residents of Ipswich and increase the likelihood of requiring welfare support.

Smith and Dogaru (2020) further illustrate that in 2019 within Ipswich, 23 of its 85 neighbourhoods (LSOAs) were among the 20% most income-deprived in England. Added to this context was the COVID pandemic in 2020, the impact of which requires no further explanation, but it was the catalyst for Anglican Church involvement in the organisation and management of the TuS.

The researchers recognise that within Ipswich there were, and continue to be, many charitable and voluntary organisations who provide considerable support to residents. However, what was interesting about TuS was how, in a time of crisis, the geography and embedded presence of the church and its estate would influence the way in which TuS operated. Further, how the communities would respond to the suggestion that ‘communities are often regarded as being increasingly secular’ in which ‘public spaces have been allegedly emptied of God’ (Taylor, 2018, p.2). However, in a time of crisis, several individuals – and many without any religious conviction – turned to the church for help. The quotes from Anne and Susan (organisers) and Digit (customer/volunteer) provide a flavour from their perspective as to why this may have happened:

‘I’ve got a vision for it, so I very much want it to be a kind of new expression of church within church... But I think in a like a quite a close knit; looking out for each other, just like it used to be in the old days when everybody knew everybody else’s business and if there was a need, it was met. I would like it to be something like that.’ (Anne)

‘Well, it’s the community... it’s been eye opening, seeing, you know, [this] side of Ipswich; that there’s so many other people who are in the same situation... I sort of feel like... it is you’re learning about a whole other form of a society that existed that maybe a lot of these people haven’t [seen].’ (Susan)

‘I went to xxxx and I went to the one at xxxx and the atmosphere, they, the people were extremely nice. I’ve decided in my own mind it’s rather more of a community than... simply a top-up shop... I’m not Christian, but I’m in awe of those, you know... they have another charity coming in once a month... xxxx does hair once a month... Family First, which is another charity, come in there once a month... I think they’re absolutely amazing. But now we’re doing a little bit back. I’ve been down to repair roof and then fairly recently they asked the volunteers to come in on a Friday, in a Saturday to do some jobs.’ (Digit)

These quotes from Anne, Susan and Digit are consistent with the views of organisers and volunteers alike. What is interesting is the references to community within the data; it was very clear that participants were not attending TuS just for a £2 bag of food. There was also a sense of developing communities which were surprisingly inclusive across age, ethnicity and religion. It could be argued that this is a visible representation of what Shannahan (2019, p. 243) means with his claim that the church has an increasing role to play in the politics of civil society from which the state has withdrawn and how, in addition to fulfilling a pastoral role, they are likely to be in greater demand and possibly in a leading role. As such, it appears that the TuS have assumed such a role with the TuS provision, notwithstanding that sustainability has become an issue.

TuS also demonstrate what Beck and Gwilym (2020, pp.384-385) observed in respect of food banks, in the sense that ‘a whole industry has evolved in support of not just food, but also through the donation of voluntary time and coordination, delivery, referral, management, and partnerships’. Denning (2021) also highlights how faith-based volunteers are playing a crucial role in UK welfare provisions, and the quotes from Anna, Susan and Digit illustrate this. This leads on to other themes pertinent to who uses TuS, the nature of the produce and products available, as well as the experience of using the

shop itself. This includes perceptions of stigma by doing so, which is an aspect of the TuS' experience. This main theme was linked to three sub-themes: who uses the shops, the take-home value of a £2 bag, and the TuS' experience.

Who uses the Top-up Shop?

The volunteers record minimal data concerning the resident postcodes for their customers, which helps them to track demand. Thus, identifying the need to collate more detailed data. In Phase 1 the researchers observed other variables such as the demographics: the age, sex, nationality and religion of the customers at TuS varied, but overall, most were white (European). However, of note, across the four sites closest to the town centre, visible ethnicity was more varied where higher numbers of minority ethnic, Afghani, Iraqi and Romany customers were observed (as later confirmed by volunteers). These sites were consistent with some of the most significant areas of deprivation in Ipswich as illustrated in the Hidden Needs report. Customers were predominantly women (approx. 80%). Their ages appeared to range from early 20s to 90s, with several young families attending with children (some sites had clusters of these age demographics). Customers, in the main, walked to the TuS that were most accessible or had limited parking, such as the town centre, whereas at sites on the outskirts of the town more people arrived in cars. An unexpected visible factor was the presence of elderly customers at all sites. The relevance of these demographics will be considered throughout these findings.

The quote below from one of the organisers illustrates the observed social depth and breadth of customers using TuS:

'Our customers are lovely, but these people, they've just gone into retirement, and they've discovered that actually their pension is not enough. Some of them don't have [a] private pension. Some of them are in private rented accommodation and they come along and

we're stretching their budget. We get an awful lot of people stretching their budgets. Then I would say we have [some] just about managing, what they call the in-work poverty [and] the people that are on universal credit, and that universal credit is late, or they can't stretch it. Some, they're working zero-hours contracts, that kind-of-thing. We see quite a few single parents with younger children, and we have a few asylum seekers, refugees who are actually lovely... But the ones that really speak to me are the just about managing, they're the people that they know. And again, through no fault of their own, they are really struggling. And there's a huge section of society that are in that position.' (Daf)

Daf's quote illustrates a common lived experience of participants and organisers concerning who uses a top-up shop. It is also consistent with the literature concerning poverty and the rising cost of living as indicated by Hebinck et al. (2018) and Francis-Devine et al. (2023). However, this does not mean that the demographics of the customers were necessarily foreseen by TuS' organisers, volunteers or customers. In fact, there were some elements of surprise within the participant accounts for this study concerning those attending TuS, which appeared to reveal elements of a new narrative around who uses them. This is expressed quite clearly by Chris, a TuS volunteer who stated:

'I've got youngsters coming in with young families, I've got a little baby, sort of 30/40-year-olds who have struggled throughout life in abusive relationships on drugs and very, very wary of other people being kind. Why are you being kind to me?'

It is also notable that Daf does not specifically mention the unemployed or out of work per se in his account of those attending TuS. Indeed, he expresses surprise at those experiencing in-work poverty and how

through volunteering he had revised earlier notions of those in need, particularly that of the just-about-managing (JAM) group:

‘The just-about-managing... these are people whose budgets are stretched... They’re working, their budgets are stretched... we are seeing more than ever.’ (Daf)

This was supported by Clara:

‘People are working but still struggling.’

The JAM group was an important finding and will be discussed further in the section Drivers of demand.

Initial misconceptions about those using the service were consistent among both customers and volunteers, in that they expected the unemployed to be the most likely group of individuals to access the services, along with individuals who reside in certain geographic locations (more low-income areas). However, this was not borne out in their experience or the data, as a high proportion of elderly participants, families with at least one member in employment (JAM), and young families were the main groups using the service on a regular basis. A range of family structures was evident:

‘I’ve got youngsters coming in with young families’ (Chris) and ‘We see single parents, blended families, grandparents with grandchildren, elderly, pensioners, everything.’ (Daf)

While the research did not centre around concepts of relative or absolute income poverty (see Poverty in the UK: Statistics for definitions) it must be noted that this study’s participants often perceived their situation to be challenging and food insecurity to be a real issue. It was also recognised by volunteers and customers that alongside the family aspect, young people and the elderly were accessing the service without judgment or prejudice.

Several participants alluded to being surprised by the need for older people to use the service, particularly those of pensionable age:

‘There’s a huge proportion... who probably are older’ (Anne) and ‘High proportion of retired... The oldest is definitely in their eighties, if not older.’ (James)

There was also discussion around the different minoritised ethnic groups using TuS in some locations:

‘You’ve got people from Afro-Caribbean... Polish, you’ve got English and other communities... some Romanian... Iraqi refugees.’ (Susan)

This illustrates that there is a widespread level of need across communities and that sites were aware of the broad spectrum and peculiarities within the demographics of the individuals they support. These included individuals in part-time or full-time work as discussed above who were still unable to manage or who were managing before a recent critical life event such as illness, unemployment or bereavement.

Food supply and range of products

Before considering the specific issues of supply and the range of products available, several structural issues were also raised by participants which have a bearing on how TuS operate. As stated earlier in this report, the Anglican Church has an estate which is geographically ideal for operating TuS. However, it was not purpose-built for this use. This structural deficit can lead to logistical issues needing resolution by either increased labour, or extra expenditure for adaptations to the estate. Other issues relate to the additional costs of heating and lighting. Most of the sites would organise volunteers to visit supermarkets at agreed times to collect surplus goods at the end of the day to be used in TuS the next day. This requires, labour,

transport and storage. Other goods requiring conveyance and storage came from FareShare and a county council storage facility in Ipswich. The quote shown below illustrates the labour issues and how customers becoming volunteers has helped the developing community:

'The sheer volume of stuff that we have to get from the church gate and through the church, that's quite a huge challenge. Um, so manual stuff... So that's always a problem for us, getting the stuff in... but probably the hardest thing is making sure that the people were there to make it run. The more people that can come and volunteer... And I think that's been the nice thing about our particular set up... because some of the customers are now volunteers. And again, that's part in my mind of building up community. And I think that that's been really lovely. Not a challenge, but probably a benefit.' (Anne)

There was an array of food products across all sites, but it was evident that availability of products could be inconsistent as issues of sustainability were beginning to show during the case study. Some sites were well stocked but other appeared to quickly run out of supplies and were not able to serve those remaining customers. For example, in one shop, after 29 customers, only few tins of food were left and nothing else. In the quote shown below, Chris, an organiser, explains how his site resolved the logistical issue of low stock:

'Just keeping it going and keeping the stock up is a challenge and which is why I have... had introduced the one item only of certain products because I could put 42 out knowing that I've got about 40 people in the church and that one person could take the whole lot when they walk in the door... that was a challenge and one that people may try on...I say, have you seen that queue behind? They are in as much need as you are. Please be fair.'

The stock levels and the ability of volunteers to acquire items varied from one site to another and it was acknowledged that, in part, this was impacted upon by the availability of time, experience, knowledge and the skill set of some volunteers who successfully and repeatedly applied for additional outside funding (this was a key topic of discussion in Phase 2). However, fresh food was available at all sites, and there was a range of ambient products like tinned food (such as: beans, soup, vegetables, cooked fruit, pies and meat) as well as bread, UHT milk, tea, coffee, sugar, and cereals, alongside packets of pasta and rice. In some, but not all sites additional items were available, such as pet food, gift bags, nappies, cleaning products and personal hygiene products (including sanitary wear).

Interestingly, in some sites, regular customers were identified with differing needs which were catered for when and where possible, with volunteers going to great lengths to do so. Getting some cleaning fluid from a nearby supermarket for an elderly customer is a good example, as well as the day-to-day actions of volunteers able to identify regular customers with food allergies, who were therefore able to accommodate them (gluten free, diabetic). In one case, a family with an autistic child was accommodated with the provision of cleaning products in different coloured packaging to limit anxiety.

Take home value of a £2 bag

All sites provided access to a wide range of produce for £2, with many sites providing a standard-sized bag. The purpose of asking for £2 was to allow the customers a sense of dignity by making some payment for their shop. The sense of which is illustrated in the quote shown below from a young, married parent, with both partners in low paid work:

'I like that we needed to pay a little something. I think I'd rather use that than one that's completely free, because I suppose I feel like although we're struggling, we're not at the worst we could possibly be, and that should be reserved for the people who are, okay, I think. Yeah, just a £2... is reasonable. Very reasonable, fair, more than reasonable. But I think it's nice just to pay a little something so that I feel like I'm not just, yeah, taking everything for free.' (Kirsty)

It was established from earlier observations and from data provided by the TuS' organisers that the take-home value of the bag was estimated to be around £35-£40 (based upon data from organisers of sites replicating a shop). This fact was recognised as a substantial benefit with some interviewees noting that the food was more than enough to feed a small family for a week. One interviewee stated:

'You know, it will feed us, or it will help feed us for a week, even if it's only £2 worth of shopping. And it's amazing how much you can get for £2 from these TuS.' (James).

William commented:

'If you take home £10 worth of stuff roughly for £2, over the course of a month is... £32 saved... there is just more there [on offer] that we can think about... in my case normally'.

While it was evident that the actual value of the bag contents varied across sites due to

availability of items, the estimated value of the bag in a challenging financial environment significantly outweighed what customers had paid for it. The researchers, having visited the sites on multiple occasions, were also able to identify a small number of individuals who visited several sites across the week. In this respect, customers could spend £10 across five shops each week, equating to around £200 worth of goods. While it is argued that the importance of TuS extends beyond the food shop per se to include its social value, it is equally important to note the significant benefits that the £2 bag could bring to a family, saving around £32-38-a-week on a food shop (if only one trip was accounted for). However as discussed, a small number of customers visited more than one shop in one week. As indicated in the interviews, this could mean savings which could be used to heat homes, or pay off debts, thereby limiting their financial burden. Nevertheless, it was also noted that, for some, there was a stigma associated with these benefits.

Stigma

For many customers, the thought of having to use TuS was embarrassing and a daunting experience. Stigma, shame and reluctance to engage in services offering subsidised food is a common theme in the literature, as highlighted by Psarikidou, Fielden and Reynolds (2019) and Lucas et al. (2014). Many customers were surprised to find themselves in need of such a service and discussed their initial anxiety about attending TuS for the first time, expecting to be judged or required to provide evidence that they were indeed in need of support (as required for traditional food banks). However, the friendly welcome given at the sites and volunteers' ability to instantly put them at ease often negate such feelings, as one participant said:

'They were really nice; they were really friendly. Explained what we needed to do when we were sitting and waiting. The people that ran the church came and sat and had a little chat and said hello and

what they were doing because they hadn't seen us [before]. To be honest, I didn't find it that daunting. It was okay.' (Kirsty)

Volunteers spent time communicating to customers what the service aims were and how there was no shame in using it (as several of them had used TuS themselves). This is best illustrated in the quote from Digit who initially attended as a customer and is now a volunteer. He suggests that TuS are:

'Entirely non-judgemental, number one right there. They're absolutely 100% non-judgemental.'

While Susan also illustrates how the benefits of TuS extend farther than food and in her case TuS improved her well-being through their thoughtful service:

'They often have flowers and you should see people's faces when they get a bunch of flowers, especially daffodils. It really, it's amazing ...you wouldn't think so. But, you know, at the end [of the shop] they have flowers and sometimes they'd... run out. But people walking out with a bunch of flowers, expensive bunches of flowers, like £15-20 bunches or just daffodils. So, they're the sort of things that have brightened up everyone and also because they're not judgemental'

– illustrating how important the top-up shop experience is and how it went beyond the need for food, giving the sense that TuS were about providing genuine support at a challenging time in a non-judgemental way.

Top-up Shop experience

One of the early surprises from observations was the extent to which the organisers and volunteers used space effectively to provide the TuS' service but also to provide opportunities

for customers to socialise and to create new communities, or to engage in religious activities if they wished, and to access other services such as financial advice, or health checks from visiting community nurses. Arguably, there is no other provider in Ipswich with an estate better geographically located across the town or more accessible. During observations, the researchers discovered customers regularly queuing outside TuS at 6am. At some sites, provision had been made to open the sites that early to serve tea and coffee, toast, cakes and pasties. The quotes shown below from Anne and Jo illustrate their lived experience:

'But before we actually start our shop, we open the door so everybody can come in. So, if it's, you know ...down with rain or something, they can come in and they can get hot drinks, they can get some food. Some of them called it breakfast the other day, which I was quite challenged by, is good... It's good that they do...usually there are pastries and... you know, everything we have is out of date, but they do, they describe that as breakfast, and they sit down, and they can talk to other people.' (Anne)

'The people are lovely, but people are lovely. All the others as well. I'd say maybe the building itself, because it's a church within a community centre instead of a church inside of a church. So maybe people feel more welcome to come there and you know, they don't feel it's a have to be Christian to go there... It's very different... you get a lot of families, you get various different people, all different cultures, different religions, everything. But everyone's just all in with each other.' (Jo)

The physical layout of each site was affected by the design of the building itself, dictating to the location of the social space (which might

be in another section of the building). The experience was also influenced by access to the site, whether by a queuing system or a ticket system (as discussed on the next page under Drivers of demand) whereby customers received a coloured key tag or number which would then be called out in order ensuring everyone had an opportunity to walking around the shop at their own pace to browse at the products available.

In general, produce was conveniently laid out on tables in clearly defined sections such as fresh fruit, vegetables, dry or tinned goods, and household or hygiene products. This layout meant that customers were able to walk around with their bag and choose items from each of the tables. Some sites had signs indicating how much or how many items could be taken from each section, whenever reduced stock meant restrictions were needed. In other sites, this was done verbally. There was a conscious effort by volunteers to make it look like a shop, giving customers a more authentic experience.

Though there were some negative comments from participants concerning the availability of produce at a few sites (especially so if the customer arrived later in the session) and a few comments about the queuing system at other sites, the general feeling of the TuS experience from the perspective of many participants was very positive and largely about the wider experience of the TuS than just food. This is best expressed by Marjory in the quote shown below:

'From the time we opened the doors at 9:00 and people come in in such an orderly fashion with big smiles on their faces and lovely to see you again. ...it's just absolutely fantastic. And they're there with their £2; there's never any quibble about it... I don't think any of our customers just look for the opportunity to grab and fill their bag with whatever. They are very orderly, they ask, how many of these may I have? And there was a gentleman the other day he just said, I need some toilet cleaner... I ran across to

xxxx and bought some toilet cleaner and he was so thrilled with it. It was amazing.

And when they have filled that bag with food items... they go through to the café part of our top-up shop where we supply tea, coffee, soup, bread sandwiches, cakes, little cherry tomatoes and celery sticks to try and encourage some healthy eating. And it's just such a lovely, lovely experience... A couple of days we've had... nurses to talk about well-being and they've had an area of the church where people could go on a voluntary basis to have blood pressure taken'. And it's just a fantastic experience and I love it to bits. Sorry, I've talked a lot.'

Drivers of demand

As illustrated in the report Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK (CSJ, 2023), there is little doubt that the cost-of-living crisis has become the main driver behind demand for most participants who use TuS. This theme was informed by five sub-themes with data derived from interviews: community need, cost of living, did everything right, changes to financial circumstances, and housing costs.

Community need as outlined above was observed and discussed by participants in two ways. Firstly, by observing an urgency to access services by getting there early. Secondly, in relation to frequency of visits. Volunteers were able to identify the varying levels of need across sites and across customers and respond accordingly. Some sites operated a ticketing system to ensure fair and orderly queuing, while others did not. Where a ticket system was in use, customers would access the sites early to get into a queue and thus closer to the front, to optimise choice and availability (as discussed above in reference to limited stock). It appeared that these customers would do this, the same time, every week. As also noted before, others arrived early to engage in the developing social aspect of the site in a warm space.

The need for additional food provision sources in the community was evident among customer participants, given the number of people using the sites and the overall number of bags TuS provided to customers. The demand for food bags had grown, which was a recurring theme across all sites:

'We didn't quite envisage how much need there was in the community... As well as just the pure numbers coming through the door, it's also we're getting to know people... last year [there] were probably about 40-45 a week... a slow week now is about 75... busy week is about 100.' (Anne)

There also appeared to be a demand, again across all sites, for food bags outside opening times of TuS. Volunteers said that they received regular ad hoc requests in person and from phone calls, for assistance from some customers, working full-time, who were unable to physically make it to the shop during opening hours. Chris mentioned this in relation to their site:

'Extra bags on top of it can vary. I mean, we can get a phone call. There was a phone call yesterday on our answering machine saying, please, can you leave a bag for me?'

There was a demonstrable depth of need across the sites and the communities in relation to customers numbers, driven by the cost-of-living crisis and the competing demands on financial resources. For example, some individuals felt compelled to consider whether they were going to heat their homes or eat. This was expressed across interviews with one individual (full-time worker) explicitly saying:

'I was making a decision on whether I was going to turn the heating on or not.' (Clara)

Volunteers also observed that numbers seemed to increase regularly at specific times

of the year (Christmas and at the end of every month). There was a sizeable proportion of full-time working customers as well as those on full pensions seeking assistance (see below). One interviewee who worked full-time as did their partner, expressed their need in relation to cost of living. They receive two full-time wages, but this was not enough to cover the basic costs of bills, shopping and childcare. This participant went on to state:

'The week that we get paid, we're okay enough to do a supermarket shop... but after that first week and all the bills and everything come out, that's when we're stuck... I was at max on my credit cards... We needed to make sure that the children were fed.' (Kirsty)

This situation was reflected in many of accounts from customers, even those who identified as just about managing (JAM) in many ways, demonstrating the positive impact made by TuS in relation to children and the possible detrimental effects for them if the TuS were not to operate. This fact was further supported by the sub-theme related to financial circumstances – whether it be short-term or because of an unforeseen cost. For example, one participant explained that their car broke down, which meant they had to make sacrifices regarding their food bill for the month to enable them to pay for the repairs. Another interviewee was on maternity leave from her job and her partner was also employed full-time, yet they still found the need to use the service:

'Until December, I was working full time and sort of managing okay, but then I went on maternity leave, and I do not get maternity pay.' (Elizabeth)

This demonstrated the participant's low levels of financial security, which was a common factor across many of the interviews.

The participant went on to say they were 'sort of managing okay' (alluding to JAM status) and raised the notion that they perceived that they 'did everything right' with regards to financial planning, thus expressing surprise that they ended up in a situation where they needed support. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation undertook research (see Croucher and Quilgars, 2018) that highlighted the precarious financial position of those on low incomes and renting in the private sector, where rents continually increased year-on-year and demand for housing outstripped supply. This was the expressed position that two of the interviewees found themselves in.

This surprise was also reiterated by retired participants:

'I've worked all my life... I've had a family and even then, I used to work in a factory from 6pm at night 'till 10pm... I was a registered child minder, so I had other children come in with my children... I retired when I was 66... [I'm] now 82 years old.' (Ena)

She expressed frustration that having worked her whole life and in receipt of a pension they [with her husband] still struggled financially. Across all ages, the sense of doing everything right yet still relying on the TuS service kept reoccurring, reinforcing the depth of need. This situation was worsened by having to pay rent for private accommodation when state-funded accommodation was not available.

Another participant said in relation to the cost of living and rent charges:

'I live in a rented accommodation and my rent is £700 per calendar month... I only get £488 from the council, the rest [pension] I have to put towards my rent. When I do this and with everything else I have to pay out, I literally haven't got any money to live.' (Beverley)

This is another example of someone who, having completed a full working life, was now dependent on their pension but struggled to support themselves, or pay their rent and bills, leaving them with little or no money for basic living necessities. Other drivers of demand included childcare costs, loss of employment, no recourse to public funds, vulnerability.

While TuS offered food support to those in need, it also offered a place where those in financial hardship (as outlined previously) could seek advice on a range of issues, such as money management, or assistance in dealing with and submitting applications to government agencies for additional support.

Volunteers

As indicated in the literature, by Beck and Gwilym, (2020); Curry (2022); Denning (2021) and Shannahan (2019), the importance and essential work of the church in response to the poverty crisis in the UK cannot be underestimated, and this is certainly true in respect of the organisers and volunteers of the Ipswich TuS. Indeed, the title of this report acknowledges the church rising to the challenge of working within their communities and responding to the poverty crisis; making creative use of their resources and motivating a significant body of volunteers to do good in their communities, regardless of whether they expressed any faith or connections to the Anglican Church. Many did, but it was not essential.

Once again, it should also be recognised that many other charitable services around Ipswich perform similar work without a religious conviction and are equally altruistic. But arguably, what is important is a sense of community and a desire to help others in need. In this sense, it was observed that new and close-knit communities were being formed in a way that towns like Ipswich used to enjoy. Our research found that the numbers of volunteers varied across the sites, with some having a healthy number of volunteers (on a rota system of a week on and off) whereas others fell short of

what was needed overall. Interestingly, voluntary work can be a strong indicator of how much community connections and social capital there is in an area (Putman, 2000; Boyce, 2006).

In the main, volunteers arrived early to set up tables, manage the social space, undertake admin work, while also donating a significant amount of time for strategic matters, such as organisation, applying for funding, resourcing and collecting food. Each day over the 7-day provision, while most TuS did not formally open for service until 9.30am to 10am, many volunteers could be found on site before 7am serving hot drinks and pastries in response to demand, engendering the development of diverse and regular social groups which were an unforeseen benefit of the enterprise. Volunteers displayed a good rapport with colleagues and customers alike, greeting everyone warmly.

The motivation and experience of the volunteers varied among those interviewed. The notion of doing good was regularly discussed among participating volunteers during interviews and was related to their desire to do good. This mindset of doing good feeds into some of the observations made in relation to the social element, which highlights the importance of TuS beyond providing a bag of food and lies within the wider academic and policy literature of what we know about the effects of volunteering (Nichol et al., 2023).

Both volunteers and those who organised TuS (some of whom were stipendiary clergy) outlined this as a motivation in volunteering their time. Just the act of helping others in time of need was important, as Marjory said:

'I just love people and I want to help. I don't know what originally started that. If I soul-searched back through the years, maybe I would come up with something key. But I have no idea.'



Others had a more concrete idea of why they wanted to help, saying that they identify socially with those around them, and so the drive to help was strong. For some, volunteering is an expression of being part of the church and their faith. Others desired to bring people together and to be part of a community, as evident throughout the interviews. One participating volunteer said:

‘Well, I do not want to be seen as a do-gooder. But, you know, that kind of perception of, you know, that you think you’re better than people. I don’t think I’m any different from anybody else and therefore, [but] for the grace of God, go I. Because I know what you know, each child or a member knowing what it felt like to be hungry and so I can identify with that... I want to be part of a whole community together, you know?’ (Anne)

While some of the volunteers were involved with the church already, a significant finding was that others started as a customer of TuS’ service and then moved into a volunteer role as they wanted to give back. However, this experience also allowed opportunities for self-development. One of the participating volunteers that worked across two sites said:

‘I kind of went in as a user because my partner got made redundant. So as soon as he was redundant... we used to talk about [TuS]. I sort of used one shop, then used a couple of the others as well. I helped out at xxx was the first and xxx and sort of, I was there and spoken to her once and she dropped a few hints that they could use some volunteers. They were so excited at the time.’ (Jo)

An additional aspect of volunteers doing good was in terms of emotional links and a feature of their calling. Therefore, it was no surprise that many active members of the church also worked in TuS, which was redolent of findings

that religious faith was a key motivator (Denning, 2021). This resonates with earlier discussions concerning the irony that the church, among other organisations, are playing such a major part in the charitable sector at a time when society is said to be more secular (Taylor, 2018).

They highlighted how they were practiced their faith through expressions of support for their customers. An emotional link between the church and their love for God also contributed substantially to the origins and development of TuS. One participating volunteer felt that they became involved in TuS because of their links and faith with the church:

‘I got involved quite quickly and quiet deeply... It’s not just about simply providing people with food for me now... it was just the practical side of a shop... So, we’d help, and we would make sure that people have what they wanted... but now my role is completely different. So, my role is not connected with the practical shop. My role is connected with people and listening to people and praying with people.’ (Anne)

As already discussed, while TuS were hosted in church premises and these links were meaningful to some that used the service, importantly, customers did not need to align themselves to a particular religion or express any sentiment of faith. However, it did appear that the customers we spoke to believed there was an important link between the churches themselves, TuS, and the use of prayer as well as faith in supporting those who use the service. Most sites endeavoured to bring people together in a supportive environment by running a form of prayer group that was optional for customers to attend during top-up shop hours but with no pressure to do so.

Unforeseen impact

This theme was informed by three sub-themes: **wrap-around services, social element and well-being.**

Across the interviews, there was mention of the significant impact extending beyond the original intention of TuS and evidence of the importance of wrap-around services. Again, there was no homogeneity of helps, with each site differing in the wrap-around services they were able to offer beyond the TuS' supplies. Several interviews mentioned the benefit of services addressing financial and digital poverty provided at some sites. One organisation that customers were signposted to were Christians Against Poverty (CAP). Providing a free service, CAP works with other local charities to support individuals with financial issues like debt. One participant mentioned: 'It's been brilliant with me; it has helped money management... CAP has helped a lot' (Nikki). The national charity gives additional support to those finding it difficult to manage financially and were unsure of where to get help with managing their financial situation holistically with the future in mind. It also built confidence for those who had found themselves in debt that there was a practical way out of their situation. For those who use it and to the churches providing more than just food, this was of vital significance.

Supporting people in need included other wrap-around services which extended beyond the short-term supply of food provisions. One initiative, beginning in one site but planned to be extended, was known as the 'Slow Cooker' project. The idea is to demonstrate how food purchased at TuS, combined with food staples found in the home, could be used to support healthy eating on a budget. The scheme aims to take six people at one time, over a four-week period, and give them (free-of-charge) a slow cooker to keep as well as a recipe book and utensils. Over the course of the project, organisers, volunteers and customers demonstrated/used the slow cooker and produce from TuS to cook nutritious meals, which they would share and taste test with one another. One participating volunteer explained:

'So, you say [to them], all of this could have come from the top-up shop this week. This is how much it costs to make... you take it right down to budgeting and portion sizes; this is nutritional value – and then you sit and eat.' (James)

This demonstrates what Francis-Devine et al. (2003, p.4) observed to be an important social justice element of TuS, through their ability to supply 'an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways' in terms of not only providing heavily-subsidised food, but reducing food poverty through teaching people new life skills and how to cook healthy meals with a few staple ingredients.

One compelling finding to emerge from both Interview and observational data was the important social element that grew up around TuS, fostering a sense of community and well-being that extended beyond the initial requirement for food assistance. A person's sense of community can be based on territory, belonging, shared group identity (Wilmott, 1987) and incorporate responses to life events past and present (Boyce, 2006). The social capital of 'mutual acquaintances and the identification with a sense of belonging to, and the value drawn from that' was abundantly evident in TuS (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). While many sites differed in terms of their offering and wrap-around services (as outlined above) one provision they all had in common was the ability to ensure a social space was available for customers and volunteers to enjoy together, engendering community.

As previously noted, the layout and design of the churches varied, and this meant that social spaces were either in the same location as the top-up shop itself or based in an adjacent hall/church. Such spaces were run by volunteers and allowed individuals to sit with others in a warm place before/after their shop. Some sites asked for a small donation for a hot drink and snack, others gave it free-of-charge. Logbook notes recorded warm spaces appeared well used by customers across all sites. We interpreted this

as demonstrating how TuS were developing a social value beyond the availability of food and ancillary products, becoming a significant social space that for many would be the only opportunity for social engagement that week. The customers seemed to have built a rapport with each other and the volunteers. This reinforced the benefits of socialising which occurred across the sites between customers when they were enjoying a hot drink and cake, but also when they queue to enter TuS.

One participant stated:

‘So socially it’s quite nice and cool and a benefit... The lady two in front of me today, I was near her in the queue one week and chatted [with] her and then came [to] have a drink afterwards with her.’ (William)

Another individual said that people are drawn to TuS not only by the food but also the social aspect and additional services they provide:

‘They’re not just coming for the food; they’re coming for community, they’re coming to talk to friends... We have a benefits coach... We have a hairdresser...’ (Daf)

The social aspect of TuS appeared to have had a clear impact on well-being. Both customers and volunteers mention the importance of the service not only in terms of food provision, but also the connection to, and the interactions with others:

‘It’s something that breaks up the day... I do have to think about my mental health... something I have suffered was poor mental health... It’s sort of like an appointment... I have a shower, get dressed and it’s a reason, I find... gives me purpose.’ (Clara)

Another said:

‘So, for us [mum and baby] it’s not just the financial support, it’s the mental health support as well.’ (Elizabeth)

Being aware of this impact, volunteers were known to arrange tables in ways to encourage interaction and discussion among those using the service:

‘We have quite a few people struggling mentally... depression, anxiety... neurodivergent customers, and they value the space where they can sit and have their coffees.’ (Daf)

It was also evident, across several sites, that loneliness and the need for companionship was a factor that drew people to TuS’ social spaces:

‘He has four things in his bag, and I feel really bad about it, but he comes for the company.’ (Joy)

This was echoed by another interviewee:

‘An awful lot of people come because they’re lonely.’ (Anne)

These findings provide clear evidence of the importance of the church providing simple things like a hot drink and cake before/or after customers shop, and warm places to sit and chat with each other – all of which contributed towards relieving loneliness and supporting mental health. This is supplemented by the support that the volunteers offer to customers, such as a chat and a friendly face, beyond the bag of food they initially came for.

Emotional links and customer well-being

As discussed previously, it became clear that the longer they were involved, the more volunteers developed emotional ties to TuS. As Richard explained:

'Why is it a sense of achievement as such? I'm quite proud of the work done there... giving back, really, all that luck in life, I'm not denying that and [I'm] very fortunate. I like to give back... on a volunteer basis... [What] I really like are some of the letters I've had back from customers or text messages or things like that. I've been thinking, it's just good, all worthwhile; just how, you know, [we can] just help one person.'

This sentiment was also expressed by some customers who talked about an increased or renewed interest in religion, and for others an attachment of gratitude towards the church and the volunteers. However, there were also some unexpected emotional links which, on face value, appeared not to be obvious but yet were very important. For example, several participants expressed emotional links with TuS' additional services, which highlighted (in the sub-themes) the importance of flowers, well-being, hair and self-identity. In some sites, being able to choose flowers as part of the shops' provision provided an expressed emotional lift to customers and had a positive impact on their well-being:

'You have daffodils to take home to brighten up the house and it's just the little things that you know give you a bit of a lift' (Clara).

Another said:

'They often have flowers, and you should see people's faces when they get a bunch of flowers, especially daffodils. It really is amazing.' (Susan)

Another example of emotional links to customers and volunteers' well-being was demonstrated in one site, where a qualified hairdresser, working as a volunteer, recognised how important hair was to an individual's sense of identity and self-worth, which led them to introduce a free (with the option of a donation) bookable hair appointment for customers. The importance of hair and self-identity were evidenced during analysis and several interviews. The hairdresser was someone who wanted to use their professional skills to support others' well-being and help bring customers together.

According to Patzer (1988) hair is considered to be an integral part of self-identity and self-expression – one of the main characteristics used in relation to social engagement. And so this service enabled customers to maintain a sense of identity through their hair, even when their financial circumstances restricted that possibility. One volunteer mentioned the social experience alongside the hairdresser:

'There all sorts of things that drives society, things like the hairdresser. And the hairdresser said to me, I want to cut hair... She said you have to remember it's about people's identity... [which] is important because it's part of who you are... She had a lady that she cut, her daughter and her hair, and she doesn't charge. She [just] asks for a donation [to the TuS].' (Daf)

This service was only available at one site, but its value to the customers was evident and was seen as one of the main emotional links of the TuS' experience. This reinforced once again that TuS offered more than just the £2 bag of food, by giving someone the opportunity to have a haircut and maintain a sense of self-identity and social self (Patzer, 1988).

Sustainability

The TuS' sustainability was one of the most common themes and was informed by two sub-themes: challenges and food supplies. But it also featured in many interviews where sustainability was unrelated to the question being asked or specifically related to the answer per se. Arguably, TuS' network has been very successful and grown beyond its original scope. But there also seems to be a general acceptance that demand is greater than supply, with funding becoming scarce and only available to individual TuS on a piecemeal basis. This quote from Daf provides a flavour of the weekly challenges confronting the TuS network:

'So we set up on a Monday evening and a Tuesday evening... by Tuesday evening, we know what we've got. We've had our FareShare delivery, we've had our donations, and we can budget for 125 (customers), 230 pieces of fruit or items of veg or so. We've got a budget, so we know we've got 140 ... baked beans etc. But we're increasingly now having to do more and more shopping because the donations are not coming in... there is this kind of the pressure on us now... what was supporting us is no longer there because what's happening now, the supermarkets, for instance, we used to get a lot of donations, end of day donations from the supermarkets. Well, now they're stretching their best before date because quite rightly they're a business. At the end of the day, they don't want surplus stock. So, they're stretching their [stock] they've increased their best before dates and things like that. So, we're not seeing half as much of the donations as we used to... we're currently looking for friendly farmers.'

Several of the interviewees (both volunteers and customers alike) raised concerns over the sustainability of the top-up shop service – the context of which included an over reliance on ageing volunteers as well as the perceived scarcity and complexity of gaining funding

to continue purchasing supplies. Challenges varied across the sites, depending on the volunteers, the customers they serve and the functionality of the churches and associated buildings used to home the TuS. Volunteers also discussed the structural challenges they faced in terms of being able to continue to run TuS due to the age of the volunteers:

'One of the most challenging, oddly enough, is the physicality of it... most of the people in church who want to help are quite old and not quite as physically agile as they used to be, and just the sheer volume of stuff that we have to get from the church gate and through the church, that's quite a huge challenge.' (Anne)

The financial challenges faced by TuS placed a significant strain on organisers and volunteers, trying to gain sufficient funding to respond to the ever-growing call for service. This issue will be reflected upon later in this report as we analyse the discussions which took place in Phase 2. In particular, while TuS operate as a function of the Anglican Church in Ipswich and there is a degree of coordination in respect of food and provisions, this is less so in respect of financial matters. This is because each church also operates autonomously within their own parish. This autonomy, and perhaps a lack of time/skilled volunteers-organisers, appears to create difficulties when exploring the idea of coordinated funding applications. It is unclear whether this is a locally held perception of volunteer-organisers or whether it is connected to the structure and governance of the parishes. Some parishes are very successful in being able to obtain external grants, while others had not and were partially funding their TuS on the churches' stipends and by the £2 paid by customers. The concern over financial and supply sustainability had led some sites to place limitations on products, so that they can fairly serve everyone who visits. One volunteer mentioned this specifically:

‘Just keeping it going and keeping the stocks up is a challenge. I have introduced the one item only of a certain product because... I’ve got about 40 people in the church and that one person could take the lot when they walk in the door.’ (Chris)

This is not only a concern for the volunteers but also the customers. The discussion around top-up shop sustainability because of supplies came up frequently in customers’ interviews, with one saying:

‘The worry is that the more they open of these pop-up shops, the less that [TuS] are going to get donated...’ (Beverley)

This was also mentioned by several of the participating volunteers with concern over the dwindling food supplies. As Daf also commented, a matter of note was the significant reduction in what was considered ‘waste’ or food at its ‘sell-by-date’, donated by supermarkets across Ipswich. This meant that volunteers had to source produce, which they purchased elsewhere, and this often came from the charity ‘FareShare’, bought from external funding when available. However, it is a concern that even the availability and selection of paid for stock was itself under strain.

‘We pay an amount, but FareShare are themselves struggling. So, we should get 200 kilos a week. We are currently getting 100...’ (Richard)

One volunteer mentioned that they were trying to explore networks outside of the supermarket chains and FareShare to secure the fresh food supplies for the sites. Due to the cyclical nature of fresh fruit and vegetables, they were much harder to access than tins and other items:

‘What we are after at the moment is the farms and the veg farmers and people like that... regularly making contact with them and saying do you have anything?’ (Daf)

It appeared that each site differed in the length of time they perceived they would be able to sustain the service (some a few months others a week or two) given their bank of volunteers, financial circumstances and food stocks. It was also alluded to by several volunteers that they would be willing to develop wider collaborations with diverse services as a way forward to ensure they could continue to bring in supplies.

Obligations of the state

Finally, a theme which relates to the participants’ perceptions concerning the obligations of the state and whether they should/could do more to support those in poverty by providing more funds to enterprises such as TuS. As stated earlier in this report, organisations such as the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (Vibert, 2022) have already raised concerns that charitable and voluntary organisations are filling a gap in public sector provisions, while also cautioning that charitable money should not be replacing state funding. There is also the reality that long-term austerity measures have been in place since 2010 to counteract the problems arising from the financial markets crash in 2008. In subsequent years, the budgets of local authorities and public services (such as the police, education and the NHS) have been repeatedly cut, leading to perceptions of many injustices and inequalities.



These inequalities are expressed very clearly in the CSJ (2023) Two Nations report, and it is no surprise that most participants believed that the state had a moral obligation and a responsibility to support the services that are assisting people experiencing poverty and food insecurity. Both customers and volunteers commented on this:

'I think really the government does have a responsibility... I think morally yes, they have an obligation.' (Digit)

Discussions around the state's obligations varied, but the consensus was that people with limited food provision needed support and assistance to change their situation and this was a matter of social justice, in which the state should be actively involved to ensure that provisions are equitable. Interestingly, it was mentioned that although there was a perception that the state had an obligation to help, it was also recognised that there may be issues in relation to means testing. Currently, TuS have no criteria in place concerning who can use their services, but the concern expressed from one customer was that this may not be the case if it were supported centrally by the state:

'How they're going to do that, because most of the things the state do are means tested... there are a lot of people you know, they're in employment... They might have, you know, a zero-hour contract.' (Anne)

Others suggested that while the state does have an obligation, it may be prudent to look at the local context in relation to supporting local people and top-up shop services:

'I do. But I wonder how they would do it. I like the concept of local... not centralised administration.' (Daf)

However, it was mentioned that support in a local context in recent years has been difficult because it was:

‘decided that we [TuS] weren’t food banks.’ (Joy)

and therefore would not get the support of similar state provisions and yet, Ipswich TuS provide support to 700-1000 customers each week. It was alluded to by several participants that the state should be more actively involved in supporting services such as TuS through policies in relation to food waste from the supermarkets. One customer said:

‘I think the government should look into this, like the food wastage from supermarkets... Why can’t they give it away to let people have it?’ (Lucy)

While initially there was a varied amount of food waste being collected by the sites, this has been dwindling. Some volunteers indicated that supermarkets, they believed, were amending their purchasing so that they have less waste or that they had become acutely aware of the additional cost associated with ‘sign-off food waste’ and therefore it was cheaper to just throw it away. It is important also to acknowledge that there is encouragement from the government for supermarkets to reduce waste.

Please note: several of these key themes also emerged in Phase 2 policy symposiums.

Phase 2

Informed by the research activity from Phase 1 and from discussions arising from a UoS conference in June 2023 at The Hold, Ipswich, Phase 2 encompassed three policy symposiums held at the university and advertised on Eventbrite. Organisers and volunteers from TuS were joined by representatives from the local authority, the local business community and other charitable and voluntary organisations, each of whom expressed a common interest in supporting the top-up shop network, as well as develop policy and a practical response to tackling poverty in Suffolk. Thematic framework analysis was employed to explore the data from these sessions. This method of analysis was used as it allowed the researchers to develop an appropriate framework from which they identified key themes, concepts, and relationships in the data to best satisfy the research questions (Ritchie et al., 2014). As a reminder, the three issues covered in the symposiums are:

- developing sustainably
- engendering mutual relationships
- working with policy makers.

The analysis framework was informed by these topics, and emerging themes included:

- sustainability
- dwindling donations
- funding
- volunteers
- exemplar
- local context
- preventing crisis.

(There were several similar key themes across Phase 1 Interviews and Phase 2 symposiums.) Due to the nature of the symposium format, discussions associated with the themes and sub-themes do not have individual identifiers. Themes/issues raised during the symposiums are discussed from a group perspective.

Sustainability

Two of the principal concerns raised by organisers and volunteers of TuS were sustainability and funding, with a perception that both of these challenges are intertwined. As discussed in the data from Phase 1, this illustrated the increasing problem of obtaining food donated from local supermarkets as well as securing provisions of sufficient quality, quantity and variation from charitable services such as FareShare, or from the local authority. Participants recognised that TuS should be realistic about what they can achieve with their provisions and services, given their current structure, and how best this can be done in both a healthy and sustainable way most beneficially. While the organisers/volunteers recognised that TuS could continue to deliver their service on a weekly basis, they would require coordinated systems in place to ensure that long-term sustainability is achievable, and this may include external collaboration and funding.

There was consistent mention of the belief that while originally it was thought that the food crisis would subside within 2-3 years, it had become clear that this is not the case and that a long-term plan was required to be able to continue the service. The size and scale of the current problem is well documented in the literature review (see Local context on page 11) which provides the context for this discussion, but also the context within which services such as TuS are operating. Disturbingly, it was noted that if funding stopped, TuS would be forced to close within a week or a few weeks at best (site dependent). This led to discussions about what would happen if the service were to end. Without raising any criticism of local authorities, it was a perception that, along with other similar services in Ipswich and elsewhere, TuS were delivering a service which is demonstrably filling a gap in public sector provision while self-funding to do so. This mirrors the concerns raised by Vibert (2022) supported by the CSJ (2023) report, as well as Francis-Devine, et al., (2023). However, a rebuttal to this assertion is that the state has supplied funding to local authorities under their levelling-up policy distributed through local authority measures.

Those who use the formal food banks are required to produce some evidence of their level of need, whereas customers in TuS do not. Although this may be considered a moot point, as the absence of a requirement to produce any evidence of their deservedness does not mean that those who use the service are not deserving or not in need, this is illustrated in the interviews. It is also likely that many who do would be entitled to more state benefits if they chose to claim them, placing a greater financial burden on the state, and it is a personal matter as to why they do not. As such, there was a perception that if TuS ended it would likely cause genuine distress to those who use them, many of whom openly discussed what led them to use the service and for some, it was an unforeseen consequence of the recent financial crisis and a surprise to them that they had been moved to do so.

This overarching theme was further broken down into sub-themes relating to the concern/discussions around sustainability and funding:

- dwindling donations
- funding
- volunteers.

Dwindling donations

As discussed in the sustainability section in Phase 1, dwindling donations was a concern for all organisers and volunteers of TuS, with consistent mention of anxiety around the inconsistency and reductions in food supply. Provisions from Saxon House, a previously regular supplier, were becoming rare. Therefore this cannot be a service which TuS rely on wholly as a sustainable source of supplies.

They also noted that supermarket donations were decreasing with the rise in the cost of living – with several reasons being noted, such as supermarkets operationally adapting towards waste reduction, with further policy changes on matters such as ‘use by’ dates which were being extended. It was also noted that supermarkets now have their own £2 bag

system, where they sell off food in bags at the end of the day as opposed to donating it. Further, a waste quota had been assigned to the supermarkets, affecting what is signed off as waste and what is allocated to community aid.

Participants mentioned that they had spoken to a local supermarket about supplies and that it was commented that sometimes it is an easier process to scan food waste for the bin rather than scan it as stock out for donations. It was acknowledged that financially, there are also costs involved with tasking staff to process the food, and as supermarkets are employing fewer staff, it suits supermarkets better to dispose of food, as opposed to scanning it and donating it to charity. It was alluded to that the community champions for each store are overwhelmed, and therefore their systems for voluntary donations of food are not as efficient and effective as they could be.

It is of interest that within the discussions, there was a suggestion that TuS and other comparative services could assist supermarket chains financially by taking the items otherwise destined for the bin, while also affecting the global crisis of food waste by repurposing items which would have gone to waste. But suggestions like these stir up an existing argument around social justice; whether drawing on supermarket surplus food at its sell-by-date should or should not be 'considered the panacea', or seen as a 'short term band aid' to food poverty and insecurity (Caraher and Furey, 2020, p.1).

Funding

It was evident that there was also a consensus of concern over the funding that TuS receive. The funding is what TuS use to purchase their supplies and for some is used to bring in additional services. While it appears some TuS have a dedicated person who oversees funding applications, this is not consistent across the sites. However, despite some sites having a dedicated person who applies for funding, they have alluded to there being less options more recently to apply for different grants, due to increasing restrictions. It was discussed that there are two main restrictions which affect TuS from being able to apply for grants:

- Ipswich TuS operate under their own individual parish's excepted charitable status
- they collaborate on many operational matters but not funding.

The consensus in this symposium was that the top-up shop network would benefit from exploring ways around funding acquisition to ensure that sites remained sustainable. Specifically, a suggestion was made that Ipswich's network in its entirety register as a charity (overcoming the internal challenges) making it easier for people to donate money. This would make it easier to collaborate with other organisations such as FareShare on logistics and storage. However, for reasons already alluded to, organisers responded that this would be difficult because of their autonomous, excepted charitable status, as well as other governance issues. It was mentioned that ultimately the top-up shop service would like to become self-sustainable for the food supplies they dispense and use funding for additional 'wrap-around services' (mentioned as a discrete theme on page 55). There appeared to be consensus within the symposium that others would wish to explore and assist with the logistics of gaining food supplies in greater quantities direct from food produce growers and suppliers and to assist with storage.

Volunteers

Volunteers were discussed in all three symposiums in relation to sustainability. The discussions were linked to the actual number of hours volunteering people are asked to do, the physicality of the work and physical tiredness.

Concern was raised over exhaustion among the current bank of volunteers. And while to date it was said that there has been little disruption with burnout or ability, they appreciated that this could not go on endlessly. Participants mentioned the 'burden and stress that currently sits on volunteers' as being a point of concern that needs alleviating. It was clear that this fatigue stemmed from the physical demands of the work, with volunteers having to engage in manual labour on a weekly basis, moving stock, tables and other items, despite most of the volunteering pool being over 60 years old.

It was mentioned that TuS (and therefore their volunteers) covers the bottom and the top of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's model presents a five-tier, basic human needs pyramid, covering basic needs at the lower level such as food, water etc. and higher needs such as safety, love and belonging towards the top level (Maslow, 1943). Therefore, while volunteers provide support in relation to food, they also provide support in relation to customers' physical, mental, and spiritual health.

While all organisers and volunteers acknowledged the need for more volunteers, there was also mention that the expectations of people who enquire about volunteering appears to be too high. One participant mentioned that the 180 hours of voluntary work needed each week to operate a site may be off-putting, as the division of labour is spread over a relatively small volunteer workforce. For some, this equates to around 40 hours a week per person – the same commitment as full-time employment. This leaves the sites with the current number of volunteers stretched thinly, and resonates with the observations of Beck and Gwilym (2020) and Denning (2021) concerning how a whole industry has evolved in respect of voluntary food provision and labour, with faith-based volunteers playing a crucial role.

It was discussed whether TuS could benefit from exploring ways in which volunteers could be relieved of the bulk of organisational work, with suggestions involving expert help in terms of logistics and storage of supplies. However, as a matter of social justice, these would need to be supported better within a local infrastructure. Yet there is a balance to consider, as while it was consistently acknowledged that top-up shop logistics requires a lot of hours and hard work, there was also mention of the benefits of volunteering. Participants discussed how the weight carried by a volunteering reference on a CV has immense value, especially for people who have gaps on their CVs, for whatever reason. This is not only useful for the volunteering individual and TuS, in terms of support, but also to the state, as it can help get people out of work back into employment. There was evidence that this had actually happened.

Exemplar

The second overarching theme developed through the analysis of the symposium sessions was to consider whether the top-up shop model could be considered as an exemplar in the local context. If so, whether the model could be rolled out more widely, not only in Suffolk but beyond. This theme was further supported by three sub-themes:

- local context
- crisis prevention
- politics.

Discussion centred around how TuS are unique in their set up and in some sense, a USP had been devised around them. There was mention that the selling point of the TuS is that people get to choose what they need most. Organisers suggested that TuS are not a pre-packaged parcel service (although they occasionally do this for emergencies) neither a food-only provision per se, or a food bank, but that they are somewhere in the middle. This is important to the notion of being an exemplar as it highlights the difference between the most common charitable food provisions in the Ipswich area when compared to the top-up shop service – not only because customers can choose their supplies, but also because of the additional services and support offered.

At many food banks, customers are given a parcel, whereas at TuS, customers can freely choose (within reason) from the supplies available. While it could be argued that those in most need would be happy to receive any assistance, the ability to choose allows customers to retain some autonomy and dignity as well as, more practically, to select items they need rather than have to take what was given to them, and so reduce waste. However, the additional services offered and discussed throughout this report give greater credence to suggestions that the top-up shop service is unique in the local context.

Whether TuS in their current form could be used as a model to roll out across Suffolk resulted in a difference of opinions in the discussions. Organisers of TuS present suggested they would prefer to maintain the contextual flexibility for longer-term sustainability, with the additional security of a more robust supply chain. Others supported the need to find more ways to obtain and redistribute surplus food (not just from supermarkets) and this is something which had been discussed in the Phase 1 Interviews and in the Phase 2 themes (sustainability and funding). Conversely, one person expressed a view that the top-up shop model already feels like an exemplar and that they would use the model if they were to move to a different location in future. In summary, it was considered that the top-up shop network is unique and successful in many ways, but there was no ambition for the existing network to grow outside its current footprint. This is not to say that it could not be replicated elsewhere.

Local context

The discussion about local context was vibrant across the sessions involving organisers, volunteers and other representatives present. There was a strong desire to agree best practice, create opportunities for collaboration to best serve those in local communities, but also to reflect on how TuS are currently being used.

It was evident that the organisers and volunteers running TuS were very keen to ensure that anyone interested in developing and supporting services for their shops were also sensitive to the importance of how the local context in which each site operates, as well as the impact made on the services a site can deliver and how they are delivered. This sensitivity is wholly consistent with earlier observations from research by Denning (2021, p.59) who, as cited earlier, suggests that the benefits of the involvement of the Anglican Church in voluntary enterprises like TuS can be understood around three themes: 'Space, with the uneven distribution of voluntary sector welfare provision; Place, as voluntary sector provision is affected by where

it is taking place; and the Political context, as voluntary sector provision is increasingly in the context of the retreating welfare state'. As also suggested, in doing so, a relational context is developed between volunteers, service users and organisations alike and to their wider environments (Denning, 2021). The participants for this case study highlighted that the Anglican Church has a presence in every community, knows those communities and understands how TuS could work in that location based upon the context of Space, Place and Political context.

As an example, participants mentioned how, because of varying levels of poverty across Ipswich, they have lived experience that some areas present with a higher number of customers who appear to be 'systematically stuck'. Citing years of generational poverty, continued poor mental health, a lack of education and unemployment, such customers' needs are potentially different to those in more affluent areas. It was also discussed how organisers could contextualise their top-up shop within the data presented by Smith and Dogaru (2022) some of which presents areas of Ipswich with long-term levels of poverty (which for whatever reason have not been addressed).

As for poor mental health, lack of education and unemployment, these issues are also mentioned as being significant in their discussion concerning deindustrialisation and the concept of left-behind towns by Fiorentino et al. (2023) – evident in both research data as well as the lived experience of organisers, volunteers and customers of TuS. So these issues also present, in a very meaningful way, that the effects of poverty are extremely vivid for some individuals whom TuS seem to provide invaluable support. It is, therefore, important to reflect upon how the long-term consequences of deindustrialisation discussed earlier in this report and any subsequent civic decisions made to help redevelop the town of Ipswich will have a social impact on some communities.

There also appeared to be an increasing awareness among local councillors as well as statutory and charitable services across Ipswich of TuS' services. This has led to TuS being

a point of referral for local people in need. It was suggested that 'The Bus Shelter' and the Citizens Advice Bureau regularly refer the top-up shop service to the people they meet. It was also suggested that locally, the network is being signposted by relevant services as a provision which can be easily and consistently accessed by all. While this is something which organisers appeared to welcome, they also expressed concern that due to increasing fractures in their supply chain and their issues gaining funding, local networks need to remain local, and co-ordination of local needs requires improved management. One participant mentioned, 'We have to be aware of our capacity'. This is not only important in relation to the local context but also in relation to sustainability.

Crisis prevention

There was a strong suggestion in the discussions for Phase 2 that one of the aims of TuS is to prevent people falling into crisis, as crisis brings even more problems, such as poor mental health and a potentially greater burden on the state. All the organisers of TuS mentioned how they regularly receive calls from people who are in distress and in need of food. It is also recognised that some statutory services are also referring customers to them. These can be people who are regular customers but cannot sustain themselves until TuS next open, or people who have never been to the service but have been referred to the church.

One site even mentioned that they have been telephoned by DWP asking if they can send someone that day for a bag of food. It was significant to learn that while the top-up shop for that site was not open that day, they still provided a bag of food for the person in need. This highlights the significant role that TuS play in trying to prevent further crisis at any time of the week, which is filling a gap in statutory provisions. It also highlights the importance of the service to many people in need across Ipswich.

Politics

There was consistent mention of political involvement in relation to TuS. This was two-fold in that participants discussed the ways in which TuS need support from and need to work with policy makers, as well as how TuS could be beneficial to local councils and policy makers. It was alluded to that when the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders were discussing the allocation of money for food resources, there was an assumption that the issues with food poverty were short-term and caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Again, it was alluded to that it appears there is a reluctance within the political sphere to accept that people are still struggling for food, unrelated to the pandemic, leaving a reluctance to support paying for food and grant monies. One participant mentioned that the data gathered by TuS in terms of customer numbers and the qualitative statements gathered are all something TuS can continue to provide for councillors locally, which may offer useful context to policy makers.

TuS also prided themselves on being able to regularly gather people from hard-to-reach people-groups and so would be a useful resource, providing valuable insights to local councils and wider governments from their lived experience of the impact of being impoverished. Such utility was also mentioned in terms of being able to provide local councillors with information concerning not only food poverty or poverty itself but also rare insights within the area they occur. There was consistent mention that what all top-up shop organisers would welcome is for some local politicians to help raise the local profile of TuS to help them develop further and to be able to sustain the services they provide.

Wrap-around services

While TuS were initially set up to impact food poverty as a provision of food, there is clear evidence throughout Phase 1 of the research and in discussions during Phase 2, that this is not the only support that this service provides. Participants mentioned that food should be the side-issue, and the wrap-around care/community the focus – food still being the main driver, but they are linked together. The importance of wrap-around services for people who do not have an exit (in their mind) was discussed, with participants alluding to the fact that people require easy steps to gain help and get out of crisis as quickly as possible, which suggests that services need to tackle and bolster both supply and exit from the service at the same time to attack from both ends.

A common issue raised was customers not knowing how to access the benefits they are entitled to, which is why having a specific person on site to help support people with access to benefits can be useful. Alongside that was a discussion around digital poverty – not having access to digital services to fill in forms or open accounts to access benefits. Therefore, some sites have mentioned a need for a dedicated person to support customers using digital devices such as a laptop when TuS are open. Such needs have been identified by organisers and volunteers through sensitive conversations within top-up shop communities who care that individuals are able to flourish.

One site mentioned that they now have a ‘welfare volunteer’ which has proved to be useful for customers. It was mentioned that it would be ideal if all sites had a trained welfare volunteer who could support customers with access to benefits and digital poverty issues, but who could also help with printing forms, signposting to well-being services and other concerns, too.

Food savviness was mentioned consistently to provide support and education for customers, so that they can use the food supplies they consume most effectively. Suggestions included training courses on how to reduce

food waste, slow cooker projects, bulk-cooking projects and how to create essential staples sustainably, such as soap.

It was mentioned that One Life Suffolk had previously gained funding to attend the sites and complete health checks, but this service was discontinued. TuS' organisers would welcome the possibility of exploring this further as it was a good resource for individuals who may not necessarily access support from generic medical services. Throughout our participants there was consistent support for services such as this to be reinstated, with one individual stating that the Integrated Care Board are keen to continue the work that started with blood pressure monitoring at TuS, as it was a good preventative measure. There was also mention that the Parish Nursing National network may be able to help.

A key message was that the ability to individually shape TuS and the services required by the specific community they serve is invaluable. This means that moving forward, TuS can develop services which are useful for their customers but omit others less suitable. This was mentioned specifically in relation to Police Community Support Officers who, when present, can be reassuring for some but for others can have a negative impact.

While it was clear that participants want to develop wrap-around care provision, it was also mentioned that the big dream of TuS is to be able to put in less effort obtaining supplies, so they can put more effort into wrap-around care and support – to truly help people, beyond enabling them to merely get-by. There were, however, concerns raised around volunteer hours, funding and being able to maintain continuity given that sustainability is already a concern (as mentioned in the Sustainability and Funding themes above) while ensuring consistency in the approach and the extra services offered across the sites, but also, as mentioned previously, that they are suitable for the context the sites are in.

Networking

Discussions formed around the importance of networking as a way forward for TuS to ensure sustainability and develop the services they provide. Information was offered during sessions revealing how different services can support TuS. This was in relation to partnerships with Suffolk County Council, Community Action Suffolk, Citizens Advice Bureau and other networks in terms of logistics and distribution. There was a consensus that there is power in coordinated networking activities to ensure that everyone gets support from one another.

Networking was also discussed towards accessing support from people who know how to help with grant applications and help find volunteers. Further, conversations with local farmers and logistics companies could help with alternative sources of supplies. Suggestions were made to engage with the agriculture industry to develop a local connection. This has already started with TuS when sourcing potatoes, which arrive straight from local farming sources – indicating that developing local networking links and partnerships can secure the fresh food supplies needed. However, storage has since become an issue, as has logistics. Concerns were raised over the practicalities of farmers and other producers delivering to different locations across Ipswich. Therefore suggestions were made towards coordinating deliveries by working alongside companies who could supply storage facilities as a central hub for the supplies that TuS would need. These suggestions arose during discussions with FareShare about how they could work with top-up shop organisers to see if a local storage depot could be sourced.

Participants in the symposiums regularly raised the importance of maintaining and developing the network in the future with a specific local community-based focus, and ensuring that teams work with one another (Ipswich/Suffolk-wide) in the local context and the current environment. While there was mention that relationships were key, there was also an acknowledgement of the need for those who wished to partner with TuS to respect the ministry of the church. They

believed that the pastoral and spiritual ministry will need to be a part of conversations with potential partners to ensure that the relationship develops in such a way that it supports and fosters the church-run sites, as well as being useful for all parties involved. As such, all these activities require strategic thinking.

The way forward: implications for policy

The final overarching theme, arising from analysing the symposium data, was how TuS should develop to continue meeting needs within their communities. Earlier in this report, it has been made clear that TuS (potentially considered as an exemplar) has great potential to continue and evolve its service, but would be more sustainable through access to better coordinated support. While it was considered that this support should be at a strategic level, it should also be mutually beneficial for anyone who contributed. An important point mentioned and supported by several of top-up shop organisers was that TuS are unique, as was their journey and birth. This was something that site organisers wished to retain whatever moves they made in their quest for sustainability and improved collaboration with other services.

As discussed earlier in terms of sustainability, there had been a suggestion that in order to gain financial support, TuS would benefit from creating an overarching charitable structure. However, there was a consensus that TuS do not want to register en bloc to a new hierarchical charitable status and this was mainly due to governance concerns. There was a strong sense that TuS also wish to ensure that all sources and support are local, working together in a local capacity, going beyond retailers and wholesalers straight to manufacturers and suppliers to enhance their services' sustainability.

It was suggested that considerable work needs to be done in Suffolk, to highlight knowledge of 'what works' in services such as TuS, and how they can best operate effectively to deliver demonstrable benefits

to communities in need. In doing so, this model could be replicated. Further, work was needed to consider how TuS can improve their services as sufficient support and funding becomes available. This would include more coordinated collaborations with other services for acquiring necessary supplies and funding.

While it is recognised that policy development, operation and access to statutory funding derives from Suffolk County Council, there was a sense that it could be mutually beneficial. For TuS to gain the necessary coordinated support and access to funding requires a greater level of understanding among policy makers concerning the strategic benefit to communities of the good work being done. In return, the county council and support services could benefit from negotiated access to certain demographics/minority groups, for example, in public health matters. Eventually, this may save the state time and money, as untreated health concerns can lead to a requirement for long-term medical support. There was evidence that some visiting nurses to TuS had identified serious health concerns. In return, TuS may need to give up some of their autonomy. But by retaining the unique nature of the service they have developed through the hospitality of the Anglican Church in Ipswich, and through their hard-working task force of volunteers, they can continue to illustrate how when the going gets tough, the good get going.

With respect to the Tackling Poverty in Suffolk 2022 report from Suffolk County Council, several matters raised within this report support and evidence the principles of dignity and respect, inclusivity, co-production through lived experience, data-led long-term thinking, and partnership working. It is not the intention of this report to make suggestions to Suffolk County Council or any other body concerning how it may better support TuS as it has not been commissioned to do so. But in terms of governance, the TPS (2022) has a mandate for 'a tackling poverty partnership involving VCSE organisations'. In terms of the TPS priorities, better coordination with TuS could also address aspects of Priorities 1, 3 and 4.



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Appendix

Our warmest appreciation to the attendees of the Policy Symposiums in Phase 2 for their contributions

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Ipswich Project Manager

Kiran Lotay - Reverend, Ipswich
Top-Up Shops Organiser

Lawrence Carey - Reverend, Ipswich
Top-Up Shops Organiser

Lindsey Redgwell - Research Policy Officer

Lynn Turners - St Matthews Church

Lynne Mortimer - Mayor of Ipswich

Maisie Dyvig - Community Food Partnership
Officer, Community Action Suffolk

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PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 2024 BY:

Institute for Social Justice & Crime
University of Suffolk
Waterfront Building
Ipswich
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Proof-reading, layout, design & graphics by:
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