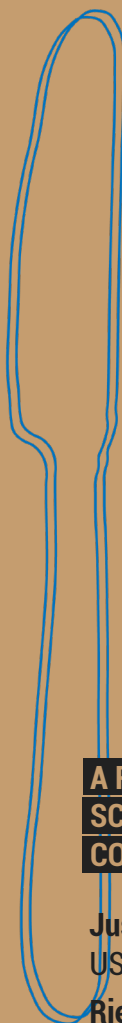
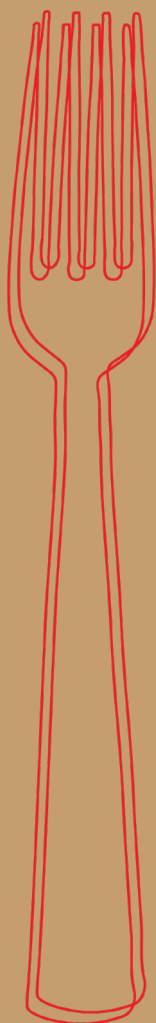


# Food Poverty

*in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough region.*



**A REPORT FOR OXFORD SAID BUSINESS  
SCHOOL'S MAP THE SYSTEM  
COMPETITION**

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● ● .....

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# Content

## INTRODUCTION

What is the problem?	8
Why should we care?	10
What is this project about?	12

## A SYSTEMS VIEW OF THE PROBLEM

Food poverty is poverty	16
Food poverty is a result of gentrification	18
Food poverty is a social mobility issue	22

## THE EXISTING SUPPORT STRUCTURE

Government initiatives	26
A local system taking over	28

## GAPS & LEVERS FOR CHANGE

Reframing food poverty	32
Restructuring the welfare system	34
Rethinking planning and local industrial strategy	36

## LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons learned	40
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Appendix	43
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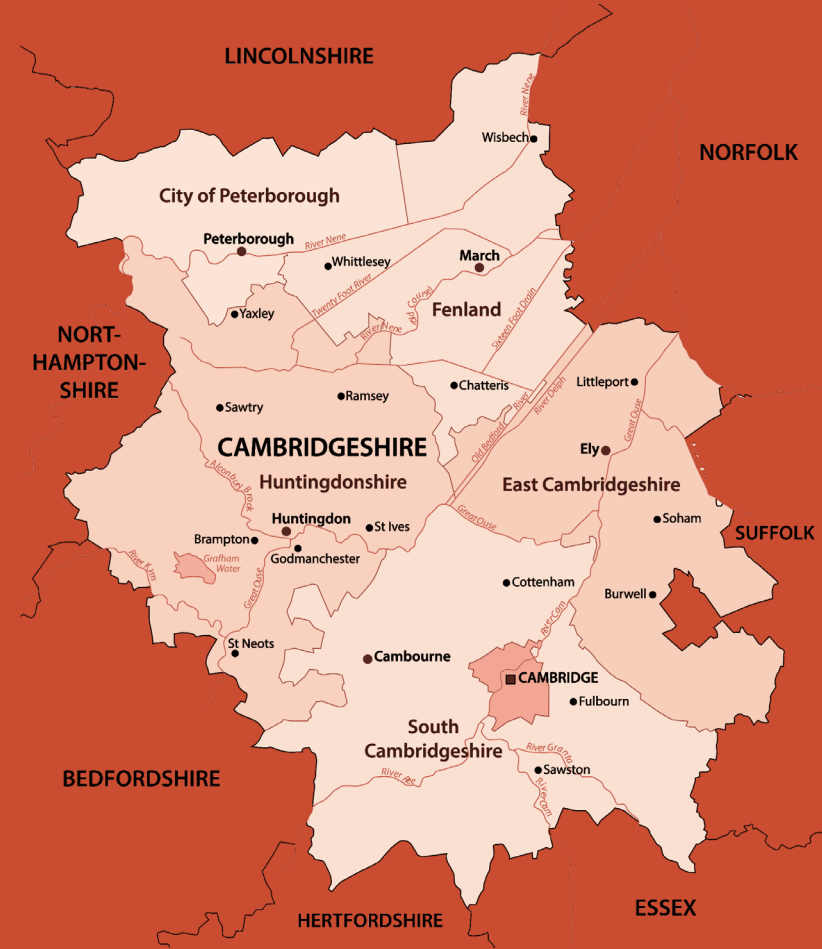


# INTRODUCTION

Near Trinity College,  
Cambridge, UK



**Figure 1. Map of the region covered by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority.**  
The six districts of Peterborough City, Fenland, Huntingdonshire, East Cambridgeshire, South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City make up the CPCA.



# What is the problem?

Situated in the East of England with an approximate population of 855,700 residents, Cambridgeshire<sup>1</sup> is often portrayed as one of the most innovative and dynamic regions in the United Kingdom. Its two primary cities – Cambridge City and Peterborough – have distinct but growing economies, with the booming Silicon Fen innovation cluster central to the region's prosperity.

However, the region is also characterized by severe inequality, Cambridge is the most economically unequal city in the UK today (Centre for Cities, 2020).

The term *food poverty* – often used interchangeably with *food insecurity* – has been described as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (House of Lords, 2020).

A major consequence of the region's increased inequality is that the number of people using food banks in Cambridgeshire has doubled since 2013 (Trussell Trust, 2020). Food poverty thus grows as a wicked problem, which has only accelerated during the COVID-19 crisis. It is now a critical agenda item for local government.

<sup>1</sup>: Cambridgeshire refers to the region which includes Cambridge, Peterborough, and the surrounding districts (see figure 1).

**200,000**  
food parcels distributed in 2019, compared to 88,000 in 2013 (Trussell Trust, 2020).



# Why should we care?



**+ 5,146%**

increase in food parcel distribution nation-wide between 2008 and 2018 (Trussel Trust, 2018).

Despite the UK being one of the richest countries in the world, food poverty is a massive problem estimated to affect roughly 11 million – or 14% – of the country's 66.8 million residents (House of Lords, 2020). Food poverty seems to have fallen between the cracks of the UK government agenda, and it has only become a high profile issue of public concern during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**£48bn**

the turnover generated by the Silicon Fen in 2019-2020 according to [Cambridge Ahead](#). It's a 5.6% growth compared to the previous year.

In Cambridgeshire, food bank lines grow longer each year, and increasingly include university employees and staff from the Cambridge Biomedical Campus. Going hungry impairs our ability to function within society, affects the long-term development of our children, and has significant implications on health and wellbeing. It also has devastating consequences for financial and social outcomes. It is unacceptable that residents of a region whose innovation cluster brings in over £48 billion in annual revenue can go hungry.



Zero Hunger is also the Sustainable Development Goal number 2, highlighting the importance of fighting food poverty «to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all» (United Nations, 2017).

“

**We have people who come to us on a weekly basis, who are staff at the university or university colleges, or at the Biomedical campus here, which is the glorious life sciences cluster that is supposed to be the envy of the world, right? And yet, there are nurses, there are staff in the engineering department in two of the wealthiest colleges, who come to our food hub.**

– QUEEN EDITH COMMUNITY FOOD HUB STAFF



# What is this project about?



This project involved a collaborative partnership with local government authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, who provided us with quantitative data and introductions to community organisations. We conducted extensive interviews with districts, charities, food banks, businesses, referral agencies, schools, and local authorities. Through this mixed-methods approach, we mapped the system of food poverty in Cambridgeshire and investigated how local interventions are both addressing and reproducing this wicked problem.

We are a team of MPA students from the **UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose**, from France, Pakistan, Peru, South Africa and the United States. We represent diverse backgrounds, cultures, upbringings, life experiences and socioeconomic status, but we share a vision of greater equality and a renewed focus on public value in society. Our team undertook this project putting an emphasis on empathy, sensitivity and awareness of our own biases and limitations.





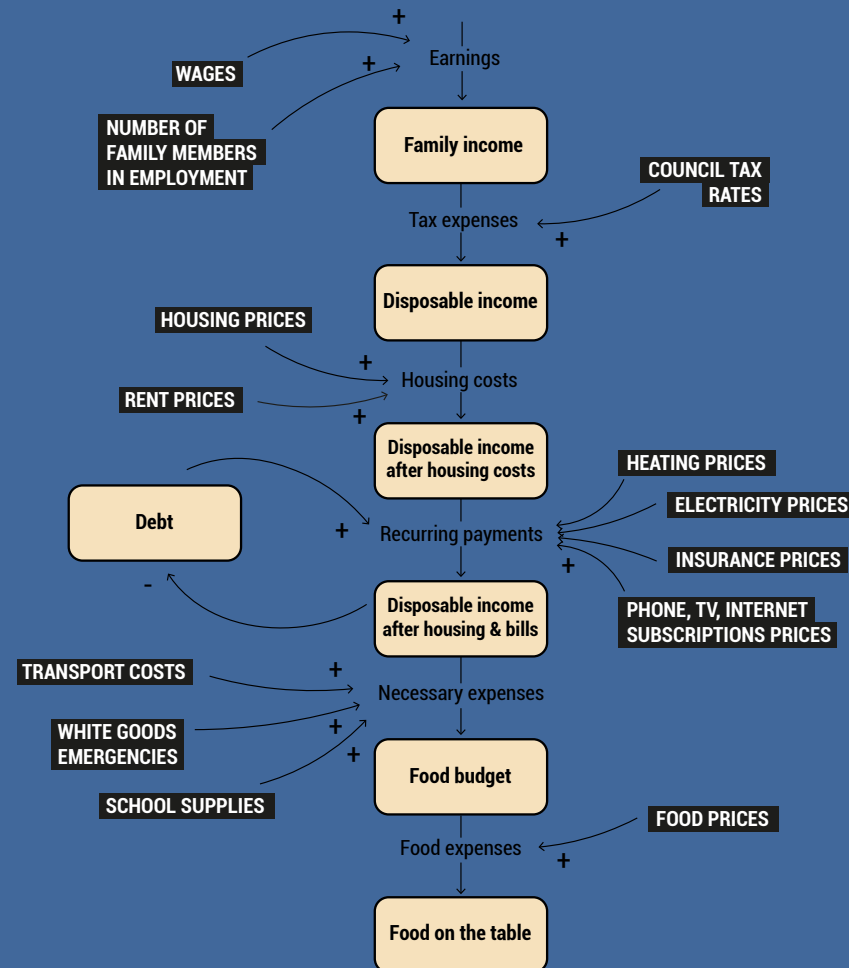


## A SYSTEMS VIEW OF THE PROBLEM

*This section will peel back the interconnected layers that make food poverty in Cambridgeshire such a wicked problem, starting from a family's budget, and proceeding through to the economic context of the region and persistency of the phenomenon.*



**Figure 2. The cascade of a family's budget.**  
Food comes last in a family's budget priorities. When a family has difficulties to put food on the table, they are also struggling to pay for heating, school supplies or to replace a broken washing machine. Resorting to food banks is the alarm sign of a deeper poverty issue. *Source: authors.*



# Food poverty is poverty

Food poverty is a measure of a person's inability to attain sufficient nutritious food (Taylor and Loopstra, 2016). At the heart of this definition is the household budget and the different expenses a family incurs before obtaining food. Families allocate resources and prioritise budgets to pay for essentials such as housing, electricity, heating, health, council taxes, and debt.

Two key statistics for understanding how families distribute disposable income<sup>2</sup> are the amount of money families have after housing and debt obligations. These two factors tend to take priority in family budgets, as people know that falling behind on rent, mortgage, or debt payments can quickly spiral into a more expensive problem. As a result, many families have little money left to pay for things such as electricity, heating and food. According to Connors et al., food is the only budget item where families have some discretion on how much to spend. In many cases, food takes a back-seat to other priorities (2020).

Therefore, food poverty is just one example of the deprivation that results from a lack of income. In many ways, food poverty is not separate from other types of poverty, but can be seen as a consequence of broader societal problems (House of Lords, 2020).

**£50**  
the average weekly income after housing costs of food bank users (Trussell Trust, 2020).

**47%**  
food bank users owe money to the Department for Work and Pensions whether due to loans or benefit overpayments (Trussell Trust, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>: Disposable income includes earnings, investment incomes and all social security benefits after taxes.



# Food poverty is a result of gentrification



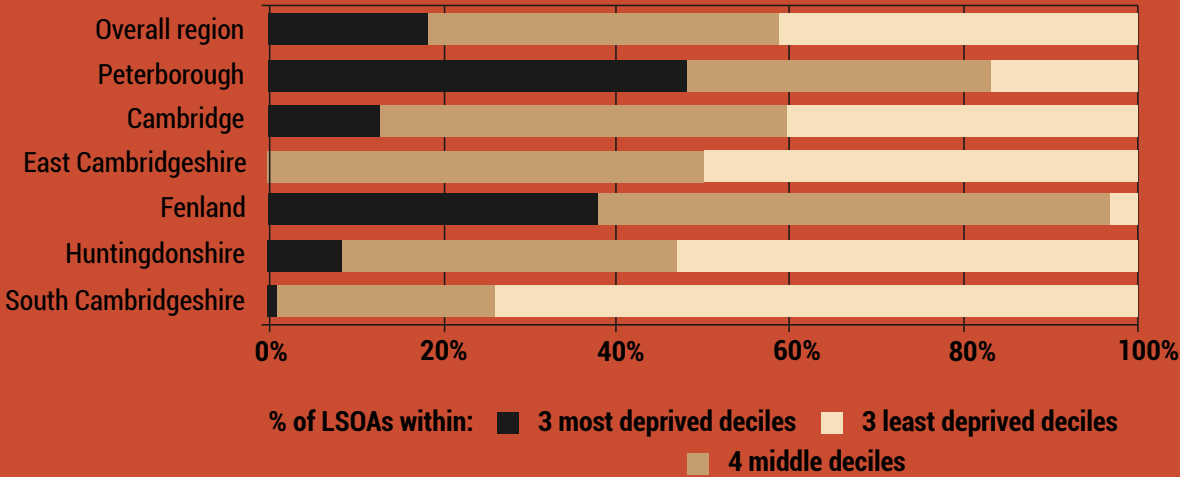
It is important to understand why pressures on both sides of the family budget - low earnings and high living costs - are endemic in Cambridgeshire.

Cambridge is the most economically unequal city in the UK (Centre for Cities, 2020). This inequality extends to the Cambridgeshire region, with an important divide between Peterborough and Fenland, which are especially hit by deprivation, and the relatively more prosperous East and South Cambridgeshire (see figure 3).

The contrasting economic situations of these districts arise from the attraction of global talent to the industrial and scientific ecosystem in Cambridge. The constant inflow of highly-skilled workers and academics adds an upward pressure to housing and living costs (Stam and Martin, 2012) and has a huge impact on the local job market, with devastating consequences for the most vulnerable families.

**1 in 3**  
Cambridgeshire residents  
is employed by a company  
from the region's high  
tech cluster (Eurostat and  
Cambridge Ahead, 2021).

In 1963, Ruth Glass coined the term gentrification: “a process by which formerly popular central districts are profoundly transformed by the arrival of new inhabitants belonging to the middle and upper classes”, these newcomers often belonging to creative and/or intellectual professions (Glass, 1963). Poverty in Cambridgeshire is deeply related to gentrification, which has been a reality in the region since as early as the 1980's (Moore, 2001).





“

**They told us it’s insufficiently aspirational for their target customers [local affordable shops compared to the Waitrose 2 miles away].**

– QUEEN EDITH FOOD HUB FOUNDERS REPORTING A CONVERSATION WITH DEVELOPERS

**Figure 4. Cycles of gentrification in Cambridgeshire.**

The rising attractiveness of the region, though intrinsically desirable, has unintended consequences on living costs and the participation to the job market. *Source: authors.*

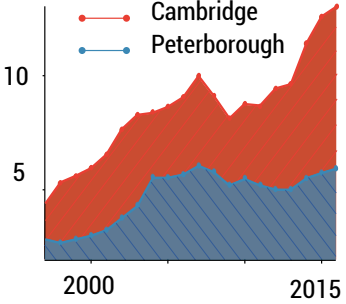


“

**People on low incomes don’t have the ability to just get in a car and drive to the supermarket, so they’re forced to shop locally and then they suffer a price premium because of it.**

– QUEEN EDITH FOOD HUB FOUNDERS

The main driver of gentrification is the Silicon Fen, the large cluster of high-tech businesses organised around the University of Cambridge. An asset for the region’s economy, it is at the heart of the local industrial strategy, which encourages the implementation of new businesses and investment in living conditions up to the standard of those creating and running them (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, 2019). However, with the Cambridge cluster comes an increasingly specialised and skill-demanding local job market, which often translates to fewer and lower-paying work opportunities for families endowed with lower human, social and cultural capital.



Changes in housing prices to earnings ratio (ONS, 2016).

An important consequence highlighted by our multiple interviews is the impact of gentrification on housing affordability. Rent prices in Cambridgeshire have increased three times faster than the UK average (Bidwells, 2019), and median home prices hit a record-high of £300,000 in 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

Gentrification also impacts access to affordable food. As higher-end products and supermarkets populate shelves and commercial zones, affordable food becomes less accessible<sup>3</sup>. Some Cambridgeshire residents are forced to travel long distances - and even take taxis - to reach affordable supermarkets and food banks, which increases transportation budgets (Queen Edith’s Food Hub, 2021).

<sup>3</sup>: This phenomenon is sometimes known as a food desert. Food deserts exist in Cambridgeshire, as highlighted by Cambridge Food Poverty Alliance (2019).



# Food poverty is a social mobility issue



Having identified the immediate cause of food poverty as the relationship between household budgets and living costs, and the underlying economic trend of gentrification, it is also important to consider the reasons for food poverty's long-term persistence.

<sup>4</sup>: The (perhaps surprising) fact that many employees of the academic community in Cambridge are regular attendees of food banks was highlighted in many of our interviews with local charity groups. High housing costs are a major factor.

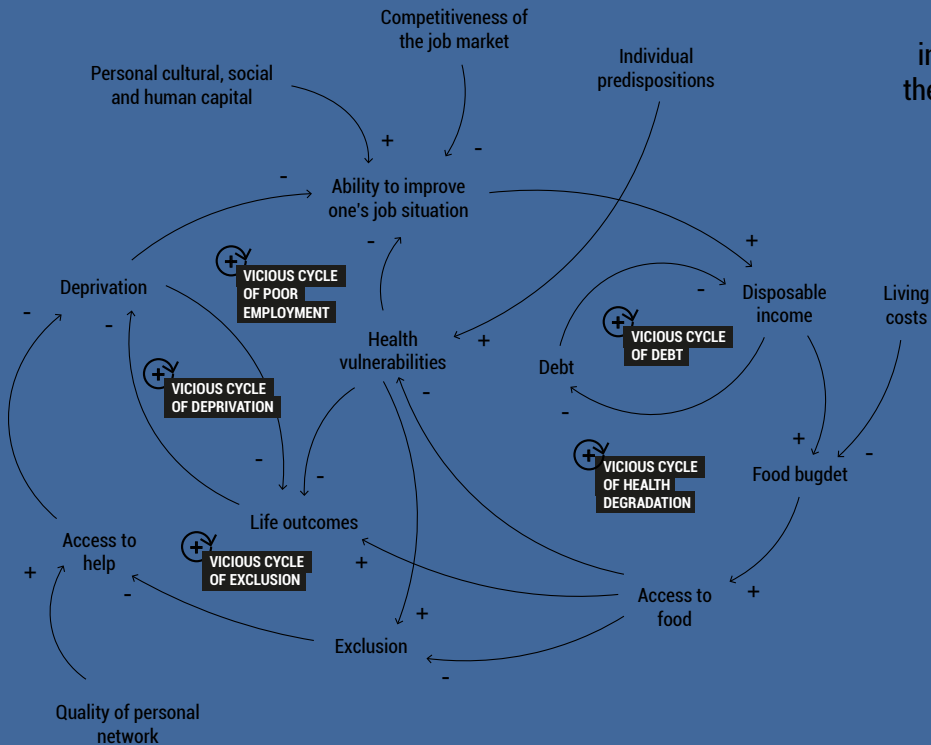
One significant factor is social mobility. Possibilities for accessing higher paying jobs are often constrained by an individual's past history of education and employment. Thus, people born into poverty face greater obstacles to developing the skills and capabilities necessary to escape it. These dynamics are exaggerated for people in the informal and gig economy sectors, where income is inconsistent and benefits are scarce. When combined with the constant influx of highly skilled workers to Cambridgeshire, many locals are perpetually cut out of the labour market or restricted to low-paying jobs.

But it is not only unemployed people who experience food poverty. Many workers - including at Cambridge University and Cambridge Biomedical Campus - earn too little to make ends meet<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>5</sup>: Our interviews consistently revealed that mothers (particularly in single income families, families with multiple children, and with disabled family members) are disproportionately impacted by food poverty.

In many cases, limited access to care systems prevent people from working. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many women to quit their jobs as remote schooling became necessary and childcare more difficult to find (New York Times, 2020). In Cambridgeshire, many mothers (and parents in general) have nobody to baby-sit their children while they work, and don't earn enough money to hire care, keeping them unemployed. This is also the case for people with disabilities and family members responsible for in-home care<sup>5</sup>. These are a few examples of vicious cycles that trap people in poverty, reduce access to opportunities and, as illustrated in figure 4, undermine life outcomes.

**Figure 4. The poverty trap.** Poverty and thus food poverty are persistent issues in which vicious cycles of unemployment (or not good enough employment), debt, health degradation and exclusion play an important role. These reinforcing cycles of hardship amplify the pressure on a family's budget to disproportionately affect their everyday life and impede their ability to improve their situation on their own. *Source: authors.*







# THE EXISTING SUPPORT STRUCTURE

Food bank volunteers  
(Photo by Trussell Trust)



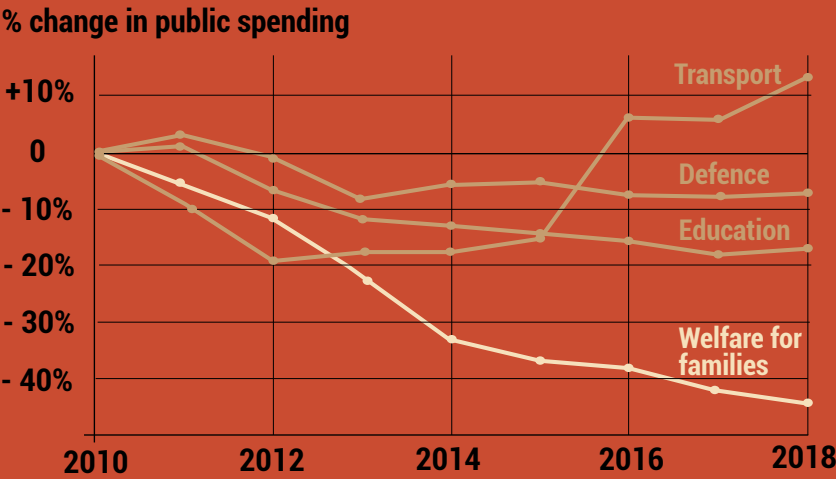
# Government initiatives



Some government-led national initiatives targeted at low-income families exist, mainly embodied today by universal credit, replacing child benefits, housing benefits and income support. The furlough scheme and recent extension of the Winter Grant Scheme to provide fuel and food vouchers appeared with the COVID-19 crisis. Free School Meals (FSM) are also being offered to schoolchildren. Testifying to their importance to families struggling to put food on the table, in 2020 footballer Marcus Rashford raised awareness to extend the FSM programme to include holidays and remote learning. Furthermore, Rashford has called for revising the free school meal eligibility threshold to accommodate 1.7 million more school children in need (Butler, 2021). Another specialised programme is the NHS initiative *Healthy Start*, which supports pregnant women and parents with children under the age of four by providing vouchers for free vitamins, milk and infant formula milk, fresh/frozen/canned vegetables, fruits and tinned pulses (NHS, n.d.).

**£60**  
the cut per week in  
benefits perceived by  
families with the benefit  
cap (DWP, 2016).

However, 70 years of national welfare progress faced a reversal in the last decade, as the UK government increasingly adopted a posture of austerity (Berry, 2016). Recently, a £12 billion cut in tax benefits and credits further reduced the disposable income of UK households (Abbott et al., 2019). This reflects the framing that currently dominates



**Figure 4. Changes in public spending since 2010.** The budget dedicated to families welfare has been severely affected by the austerity measures of the past decade. Source: Human Right Watch, 2019.

welfare policy, where food is often not considered an integral part of citizens' rights or a public health concern (Dowler and Caraher, 2003) and poverty is portrayed as a problem of individual responsibility, justifying cuts to family welfare (Abbott et al., 2019).

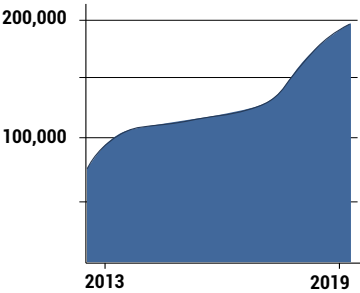
On a regional level, the Cambridgeshire County Council is running the locally devised Direct Food voucher Scheme in parallel to national programmes. The county aims to reach out to families while also sharing information and collaborating with food banks to identify people potentially in need of food (Cambridgeshire County Council, 2020). The county also provides vouchers to help cover non-food expenses, including fuel, appliances, and basic furniture (refrigerators, ovens, beds, etc). Conscious of the complexity of the problem, local authorities are currently working towards developing a more collaborative, systemic approach to food poverty, and our research insights will be applied as part of this initiative.



# A local system taking over

Top-right picture: The Edge Cafe community fridge.  
Bottom-right picture: Peterborough food bank.

Non-government and charity initiatives have stepped up to address food poverty. These programmes include donations channelled through the Trussell Trust network of food banks, which distributes parcels of food to those eligible. Food hubs – which are similar to food banks, but often do not require vouchers or means testing – have become increasingly visible in the community. Hyperlocal initiatives like the community fridge at The Edge Cafe encourage people to drop off unexpired food they might not use, which can be taken freely. Faith organisations – such as St. Paul's Church in Cambridgeshire – are also very active in providing food and other support, including facilities for charity initiatives.



Food parcels distributed in Cambridgeshire (Trussell Trust, 2020).

The demand for food banks has increased multifold. But food banks are intended as a short-term response to gaps in the government's policy and strategy (National Food Strategy, 2020). Charities have done essential work in Cambridgeshire, but are simply not equipped or designed to deal with the underlying causes of poverty. In some cases, they can inadvertently perpetuate food poverty, which is why food banks tend to be vigilant about avoiding dependency. This is why Philip Alston – the UN's Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights – concluded that the heroic efforts of the charity sector are "...not an adequate substitute for a Government fulfilling its obligations" (UNHRC, 2019, p8).







# GAPS & LEVERS FOR CHANGE

Work in progress in a  
Cambridgeshire home



# 1

## Reframing food poverty



A huge number of short-term solutions have been enacted based on the premise that food poverty is a separate issue from poverty in general. National and local government, charities, and communities have often focused on providing food to people (through food banks, community hubs, vouchers, etc) rather than address the underlying causes of poverty as a wider phenomenon.

It is clear to us that a first leverage point for change is to re-frame food poverty as a lack of resources to afford food after other necessary expenses are settled. In doing so, it becomes clear that simply increasing funding for food banks and charities (for example) will never eradicate food poverty on its own.



# Rethinking planning and the local industrial strategy



Gentrification is an unintended consequence of the region's growth, with enormous impacts on vulnerable communities. Access and affordability of basic needs such as housing and food remain a challenge in Cambridgeshire. The cost of living has become unaffordable even for those in employment.

Complimentary to the region's industrial strategy, urban planning has been targeted towards increasing the attractiveness of the region in the eyes of the most well-off. A review of recent local industrial strategies reveals that the vast majority of economic development initiatives are aimed at attracting businesses and highly skilled workers (CPIER, 2018 ; CPCA, 2019). Poverty is barely acknowledged, not to mention the accessibility of food.

A systems perspective demands that urban planning and economic development programmes make it their mandate to improve the situation of those suffering from poverty and deprivation. They must not only recognise their responsibility in worsening inequalities, but also act in concert on the goal of reducing it. Local authorities must ensure a balance is created and then sustained between growth and social development. An emphasis on providing training and better-paying opportunities for the most vulnerable is needed, as well as an effort to contain the steep rise in livings costs. Involving the planning and economic departments on these questions can ensure local authorities's effort on food poverty is not solely reactive but also proactive.





# Restructuring the welfare system



In recent decades, defunding of the welfare state and deregulating the labour market has introduced mass deprivation into the UK's economic system. Shrinking the UK welfare state achieves the opposite of UN Sustainable Development Goal number 2 *End hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition*. Research has demonstrated a strong link between increased demand for food aid and changes in welfare benefits (Sosenko et al., 2019). The OECD notes that the UK has one of the worst worker protection scores among developed nations (OECD, 2019). Even before the pandemic, approximately 3.6 million UK residents had insecure employment status. In other words, the inflow of resources This represents a huge inflow into the poverty trap, which only became stronger in the economic downturn from the pandemic (TUC, 2020).

Staying true to the purpose of welfare, benefits should ensure that citizens are sufficiently financially secure for an adequate standard of living which includes being able to afford the basic human right of food. More broadly, we agree with Hilary Cottam that the UK welfare system must be revolutionised (Cottam, 2020).







## LESSONS LEARNED

Cambridge City  
Centre, UK



# A grand challenge



<sup>6</sup>: the UK's continued reliance on food imports also means that local authorities have limited space to devise alternative food supply options, even if they want to. An important insight in terms of food supply chains however is that food poverty in the UK is **not** caused by a shortage of food.

Mapping the system of food poverty in Cambridgeshire has revealed interconnections between the broader national system, the economic context of the region and family budgets. Food poverty is a symptom of poverty – at the end of the day, the main problem is that people's budget are increasingly squeezed between frozen resource streams and living costs set on fire. Many well-intentioned programmes (both governmental and non-governmental) neglect these underlying causes of food poverty, and instead focus on providing temporary relief.

Addressing the underlying causes is the only way to help people escape from the vicious cycles of poverty and food insecurity. It is crucial that policymakers shift the focus of interventions from short-term to long-term and from making transactions with individuals to building relationships and communities. Families should be placed at the heart of policy making.

“

**At the moment, we are firefighting the furnace in front of us spraying where hottest, as the government slowly refills our small extinguisher. If they were to provide a fire engine, we could all eradicate the furnace quickly and efficiently.**

– J. CLARK, SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

It should be noted that local authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are making great progress towards this shift in perspective. While some factors in poverty alleviation, including changes in the welfare and employment systems can only be addressed at the national level<sup>6</sup>, local governments have a critical role to play - particularly on the aforementioned areas such as planning and local economic policy. The desire to change is what led the local authorities and charity organisations to partner with us on this project, and we are grateful for their ambition and tenacity.

This project has been a learning process whereby many of our assumptions have been repeatedly challenged. Our intention is for this research to serve as a starting point for a broader discussion among the local government authorities of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. We hope to instigate a change in approach that could eventually end food poverty in Cambridgeshire.



# Appendix

## Interview methodology

● ● .....

Our first step in the interview process was to identify who were the key stakeholders in the food poverty system. In this perspective, we combined desk research and information provided by the local authorities we partnerned with.

Once the key stakeholders were identified, we created a semi-structured interview guide with 6 main questions:

- 1. Why is your work needed in the context of food poverty?
- 2. Who are the people you serve? What are the stories they are telling you?
- 3. How do people get help from you?
- 4. What would you do differently if you had unlimited resources?
- 5. What do people and/or government get wrong about food poverty?
- 6. What other actors do you think we should talk to?

These questions were adapted depending on the stakeholder that was being interviewed, but the overall objective was to understand what was the role they had in the system, what elements were not functioning in the system and what were their ideas for changing the system.

Most interviews were recorded, after the consent of the participants.



We met the following organisations:

TYPE OF STAKEHOLDER	ORGANISATION NAME
Professor specialised in welfare system	Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose
Local authorities	Cambridgeshire County Council South Cambridgeshire District Council Communities and Partnerships
Referral agencies	Citizens Advice Peterborough Cambridgeshire CAB
Public-private-civil partnership	Cambridge Sustainable Food
Primary School	Beeches Primary School Peterborough
Children charity / care centre	Barnardo's
Foodbanks	Cambridge City Foodbank Kingsgate Church
Food hubs	Queen Edith Community Food Hub



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