

Beyond the food bank: using digital technology to escape food poverty

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Beyond the food bank: using digital technology to escape food poverty

1. Executive Summary

This research project explored food poverty and austerity by working directly with those who found themselves in need of food bank provision, those who volunteered or worked in food banks and other individuals involved in making local food more freely available to all. The project was undertaken in Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire and was a partnership between Keele University and the New Vic Theatre in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire. The research was conducted with the support of four food banks in the local area.

Research Aims and Objectives

The central aim of this project was to explore the experiences of food poverty and food bank usage and assess if and how digital technologies could help people move beyond this. In so doing we set out to:

- Identify the contributory factors that lead people to food poverty
- Explore the potential for cultural animation methodologies to identify applications of technologies which overcome the digital divide
- Explore the ways in which digital technology may be used to assist and support people who experience food poverty.

Methodology

The project utilised a methodology of co-producing research called 'cultural animation', a creative and inclusive way of conducting community based research. This involved conducting a series of workshops that took place in local food banks and in the workspaces at the New Vic Theatre. This was followed by an IdeaLab that brought together participants with digital technologists. Workshop participants included guests, volunteers and, where relevant, employees from each of the food banks. In addition a number of people participated who were involved in working with groups that make good food more freely available to people in the local area. Through the workshops participants were able to collectively define the research problem and co-create the findings of this report.

Summary of findings

This project found that:

- Those who find themselves in food poverty feel isolated and invisible and find it hard to ask for help and to access support services.
- In seeking to address food poverty and provide the increased levels of reciprocity and communication needed, humanity rather than technology was perceived to central.
- Technology was seen as a threat to communities, serving the needs of the powerful in society, reinforcing rather than challenging existing power relations
- It was able to identify activities that could be implemented locally where both technology and people could work together to enhance the local food environment.
- Cultural animation methodologies created an environment where community members could play a role in shaping their world and realising their aspirations and ambitions in relation to food poverty in the communities in which they live.

2. Aims and objectives

This research project explored food poverty and austerity through working directly with those who found themselves in need of food bank provision, those who volunteered or worked in food banks and other individuals involved in making local food more freely available to all. The project set out to explore the lived experiences of food poverty. It also considered the potential for digital technologies to provide assistance to those in need, when often those people who experience social disadvantage are also more likely to experience exclusion from digital and internet resources (Helpser, 2008).

The project was undertaken in Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire. It was a partnership between Keele University and New Vic Borderlines, the outreach department of the New Vic Theatre in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, whose work is inspired by a social agenda and engages with community groups that often find themselves at the margins of society. A local technology company, bITJAM, was also part of the project team.

The central aim of this project was to explore the experiences of food poverty and food bank usage. In so doing the original proposal set out to:

- **Objective 1:** Identify the contributory factors that lead people to food poverty
- **Objective 2:** Explore the potential for cultural animation methodologies to identify applications of technologies which overcome the digital divide
- **Objective 3:** Explore the ways in which digital technology may be used to assist and support people who experience food poverty.

3. Methods

The research team conducted a series of workshops led by theatre practitioners from the New Vic Borderlines. These took place in local food banks and in the workspaces at the New Vic Theatre and were followed by a Hacklab (renamed during the course of the project as IdeaLab) run by bITJAM Ltd.

The workshops utilised a methodology of co-producing research known as 'cultural animation'. This is a methodology that has recently been developed as a creative and inclusive way of conducting community based research (<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Watch-and-Listen/Pages/Weathering-the-storm-How-communities-respond-to-adversity.aspx>) which draws on American pragmatist philosophy (Kelemen and Rumens, 2013) and takes as its starting point the lived experience of research participants. This methodology has been used successfully on over ten research projects sponsored by the AHRC and the ESRC. The initial cultural animation workshops were held in food banks, and invited participants to collectively define the research problem by drawing on their life experiences and articulating thoughts and ideas in actions and images and through object selection as well as the written word.

Throughout the project the research team worked closely with four local food banks. These comprised the Trussell Trust food banks from both Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle–Staffs. At the time of the research, the former comprised 11 distribution centres across the City of Stoke on Trent and the latter, six distribution centres across North Staffordshire. The approach taken by the Trussell Trust is for people to be referred for support by other agencies (for example job centre, GP, housing association). Those referred are issued with red vouchers which they can take to any Trussell Trust food bank to receive their food parcel.

Two local independent food banks also participated in the project. One was located within a local housing project that provided short term emergency accommodation to people with mental health problems. Residents here were not required to meet any specific criteria before food parcels were issued. The other food bank was hosted in a local church was open to all and also did not require recipients to be referred. While it was open guests were able to access hot meals and also advice and support from a range of health and social agencies who were in attendance.

Workshop participants included guests and volunteers and also, where relevant, employees from each of the food banks. In addition, a number of people participated who were involved in working with groups that make good food more freely available in the local area. These included people running/working in community gardens, allotment projects and other community groups working with vulnerable groups.

Following the cultural animation workshops conducted in the food banks, two further cultural animation workshops were held at the New Vic theatre and the final event was an IdeaLab held at bITJAM's premises.

The cultural animation workshops at the New Vic were designed to explore factors that can lead to the experience of food poverty and identify potential areas that digital technologies might address. The focus of the IdeaLab was to explore ways in which digital technologies might be used to support and assist people experiencing the issues identified in the earlier workshops. Data from the workshops included photographs of installations/activities and transcriptions of activities, conversations and discussions across all events.

The section below discusses the key findings that emerged from these activities.

4. Key findings

4.1 Objective 1: Factors leading people into food poverty

Cultural Animation in the food bank

The starting point for the project was to focus on those who had or were currently experiencing food poverty. In order to capture the lived experience of food bank guests and to ensure they were collectively involved in defining the research problem, cultural animation workshops were conducted within the food banks. While waiting to collect their food parcel, guests were asked to contribute to an installation, i.e., 'The tree of life'. This installation had been developed as part of another

research project run by Prof Kelemen that looked at communities in crisis in the UK and Japan. The installation had acted as an effective means of exploring sensitive topics such as dispossession, loss and health. For this research, the food bank guests were asked to decorate the tree with Leaves, Birds and Bugs, on which they were asked to draw or write respectively: i) what they held as important in their life ii) the difficulties that had experienced that had lead them to the food bank and iii) their hopes and dreams for the future respectively.



Figure 1. Guests were invited to decorate the 'Tree of Life' in the food banks



Figure 2. Adding leaves, bugs and birds enabled a way of exploring individuals' personal journey that brought them to the food bank.

The key themes to emerge from the contributions to the tree were:

- the precarious nature of human lives. Guests highlighted that it was a breakdown in various aspects of their life that had lead them to seek support from a food bank.
- guests were often dealing with a breakdown in more than one aspect of their life
- breakdown occurred across all areas of people's lives but was most commonly in the areas of relationships, employment or health.
- as a result of the above, guests reported feeling isolated, lonely and unsure where to find or unable to access support
- aspirations for the future included stability, security and contentment

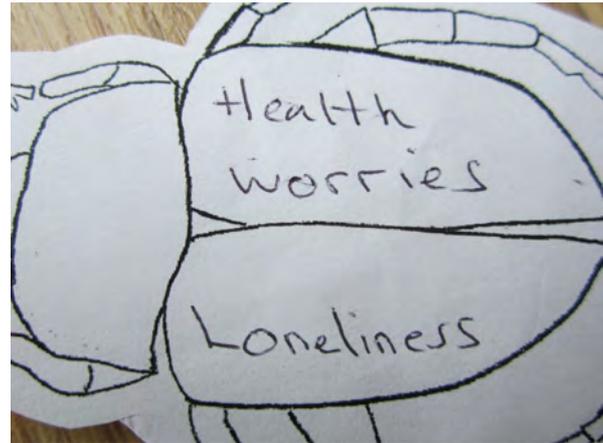
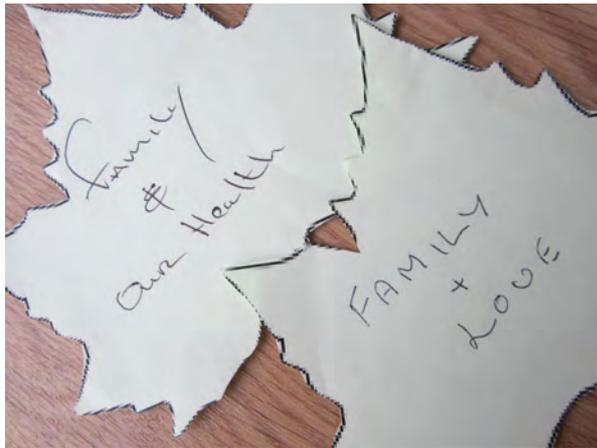


Figure 3. Examples of contributions to the tree of life

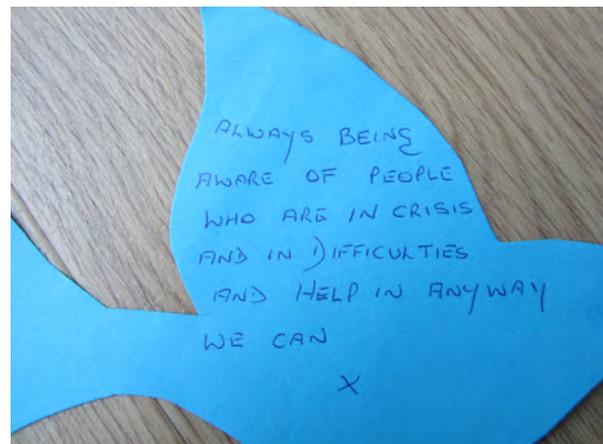
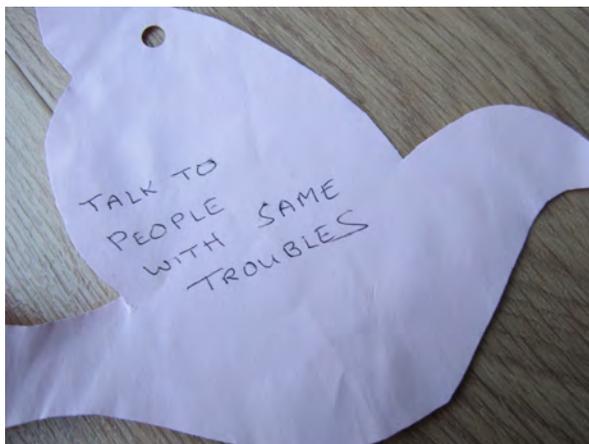


Figure 4. Examples of contributions to the tree of life

Cultural Animation in the Theatre

Two workshops were held in the New Vic theatre bringing together guests, volunteers and employees of the food banks along with other members of the community involved in food projects. Workshop one built on the findings from the “Tree of Life’ activities conducted in the food banks. Participants were asked to reflect on the findings and their own experiences to map their experience of food banks and food poverty in the Stoke-on-Trent/North Staffordshire area using a selection of buttons and other assorted items. This ‘buttons exercise’ was developed by Sue Moffat as part of her Fellowship at the Imperial War Museum, as a tool for reflecting on and discussing the Holocaust. Since then, it has been adapted for use on a range of topics including health partnerships, market place exclusion and

leadership. Through the production and subsequent discussion of these maps the following themes emerged:

i) Distinction and Separation



All of the maps produced highlighted, albeit it in different ways, the separation in society between various groups. These were often referred to as ‘the haves’ and ‘have nots’. In the map on the left, the population in the centre is wealthier (in terms of material possessions) but also in terms of social connections. The buttons are not only shinier and but they are closer to each other, reflecting the support and order in these people’s lives. As you move away from the centre, the wealth and social support become less accessible.

ii) (In)visibility



Participants depicted the experience of people who find themselves on the margins of society as brown buttons on a brown table. Found towards the edge of the table, this group largely goes unseen or is viewed negatively. People are isolated, are alongside other ‘invisible’ people and a long way from the centre of wealth and order experienced by others.

iii) No entry



Other participants used the buttons to highlight not only the separation between groups in society but the rigid barriers that separate groups: barriers which allow some groups to retain their advantage and which the others find it hard if not impossible to overcome.

iv) Lots of snakes, no ladders



The button maps reflected the precarious nature of human life and the ease with which people could find themselves 'slipping down'. This slipping or breakdown was perceived as a one way travel. It was hard if not impossible to make the return journey. Participants referred to the snakes and ladders of life and the harsh way in which society treats people who find themselves experiencing difficulties. For example this map depicts people 'being flung into the valley (of the desperate)'.

iv) Public services in a knot



Public services were presented as a group separate from society that was tangled up, non-functioning and inaccessible.

Following the button mapping, participants were asked to use household objects to create an installation, which depicted a world in which food banks were no longer needed.

The key finding from this exercise is that humanity was the missing ingredient. The world in which food banks do not exist is a very human one. To emphasise this point, one group added themselves into their installation stating 'What is missing is the people'. Other groups chose to show this aspect by including photographs and pictures as connections to other people, family or friends. Other objects were chosen to represent the various ways in which people connect, for example through communication or reciprocity.

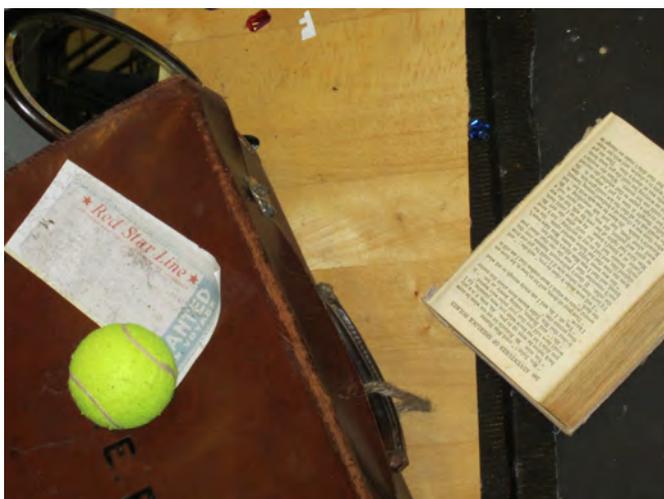


Figure 5. A tennis ball was selected to represent reciprocity and sharing



Figure 6. Another group selected a shuttlecock to show that support is something that goes 'to and fro' in life.



Figure 7. This item was selected to represent communication 'A cup of tea solves everything'.

4.2 Objective 2: To explore the potential for cultural animation methodologies to identify applications of technologies which overcome the digital divide.

The second workshop at the New Vic Theatre was used to explore possibilities for change. Participants reflected on what a society might look like in which food poverty had been eradicated and food banks were no longer needed. The starting point was the dramatized stories of food banks guests and reflections on the experiences and circumstances identified earlier in the project that had led people to

use a food bank. We worked together with the participants to design interventions and changes that could have lead to a different outcome.

Following analysis of the workshop the following themes emerged:

- The locus for change was felt to be within either society or the community more broadly, not at the level of the individual. Much of the (negative) press and media coverage associated with food banks seeks to lay the blame for rising usage levels with certain 'types' of individuals for whom the free food made available by food banks presents an easy option. The need to receive food parcels is often presented as resulting from mis-managed lives. Reflecting on the lived experience of food bank guests, individuals were seen as facing difficult situations, having little help and support and facing limited choices.
- Following on from the previous point, participants felt strongly that there was a need to change the wider perceptions about food banks and people who visit them. This could be achieved for example, through the sharing of real stories and experiences more widely using simple technology.
- The way in which government agencies seek to process people was an area in which participants saw a need and potential for change. The process driven approach meant that rules were followed and decisions made without anyone being willing/able to reflect on the consequences for the individuals involved. The focus on policy meant that people were ignored. Technology was perceived as playing a central role in this, with the 'push of button' deciding someone's fate. The machine as a remote decision maker was contrasted by participants with the living feeling human being.
- Change was also felt necessary at the community level. In discussing what constituted a healthy community, participants felt that there was a wariness of strangers 'Society doesn't like strangers' commented one participant. A society was needed in which people were not afraid of offering help and support to others, including those to which they didn't know and therefore might be a stranger.
- Similarly, the one change that participants did wish for was that individuals had sufficient courage and knowledge to ask for help and support before a crisis or emergency situation put them into the kind of dire circumstances of needing provisions from the food bank.
- Transitions in life, the point at which an individual's life changed significantly, were perceived as distinct moments where people became particularly vulnerable. These transitions might be ends of relationships, bereavement, loss of employment, leaving home etc.
- Eliminating food poverty in the local area was also seen to be closely interwoven with addressing issues of food security for the local community as a whole. Addressing the provision of high quality, nutritional food in the community as a whole would also benefit food bank guests. This was not seen as just a separate issue. Addressing issues of knowledge, skill and confidence about food was seen as a key part of moving beyond food poverty.
- Participants showed a wariness and concern in respect of digital technology. Following this a decision was made along with participants to rename the next phase in the project an 'IdeaLab' rather than a 'Hacklab'. This also addressed

the negative links that participants were making between 'HackLab' and computer 'hacking'.

The workshops demonstrated the potential of Cultural Animation to overcome divides including the digital divide.

- The methodology validates the language used by community members to describe their experiences of food poverty as real and important in developing theory and policy. By placing the 'mantle of expert' upon the participants' shoulders in exploring what changes they would like to see, who should be involved and how to make it happen, Cultural Animation dissolved the taken-for-granted hierarchies between experts and non-experts, between powerful and powerless actors.
- It created opportunities for academics, policy makers and others in relative positions of power to be able to access and understand the ambitions of individuals and communities. For example the button mapping exercise offered a powerful alternative to the more usual mappings of deprivation, offering insights into the lived experience of food poverty.
- It enabled research to be conducted in an environment where people come together as equals. The use and creation of physical objects such as installations and button maps put participants at ease with each other and ensured effective teamwork and problem solving.
- Cultural animation built up trusting relationships between participants by inviting them to work together in activities which though new to them, drew on their life experiences. This is invaluable when researching a topic like food poverty, where loneliness and isolation is a central part of what food bank guests experience.
- It created an environment where 'ordinary people' could play a role in shaping their world and realising their aspirations and ambitions in relation to food poverty in the communities in which they live.

4.3 Objective 3: Explore the ways in which digital technology may be used to assist and support people who experience food poverty.

The IdeaLab brought together participants from the previous two workshops with technologists to consider the ways in which digital technologies could be used to overcome the issues identified in the earlier cultural animation workshops and enable communities to move towards a future in which food banks were no longer needed. While the technologists at the IdeaLab were eager to 'get on' with creating technologically driven solutions, the discussions in previous workshops and those in the IdeaLab itself presented a certain resistance to what they saw as a presumption that technologies could and would provide solutions to the problems identified.

In the course of the IdeaLab, participants were asked to reflect on technology in a number of ways.

frequently meant technology replaced human labour, participants felt that using technologies could merely exacerbate the problem that this research project was looking to resolve. This could happen in two ways. First of all it would remove human contact (which participants saw as vital) and replace it with digital interaction, secondly it could also cut jobs. As participants saw it, having meaningful work was vital to individual and community well-being and they were sceptical about anything that threatened this.

Following discussion, a list of points to consider when using digital technologies to develop solutions was produced:

- Will the technology really 'fix' the problems identified or is there a chance it can exacerbate it?
- Can the technology be used to challenge rather than reinforce existing power relations?
- Does the digital application serve to replicate or eradicate divisions in the real world?
- To what extent is it possible for technology to create solutions where people are treated as living, breathing, feeling beings rather than just a concept?
- How can technology be used to add/develop humanity within various processes?
- Real difference is not made by technology but by the people who use it? How can we change what people do?
- Will all members of the community have equal access to technology? A number of workshop participants had very limited access to mobile phones/internet etc. due to financial and other reasons.

Although these points were articulated as questions and there were no definite answers, participants identified a number of things that could be done in the local areas to make a difference:

- Working together to enhance the food environment in the local area.
- The need for more cooking/eating ambassadors. This could involve linking groups of people e.g. old and young, experienced/inexperienced cooks etc.
- Changing peoples' approach to food and find ways to encourage them to view it as a community asset rather than individual privilege.
- Mapping of food availability in the local area to include foraging opportunities, allotment and other growing projects, community café's etc.
- Better signposting to match people to the right organisation to help with their particular needs.
- Enabling people to make connections (preferably through food).
- Changing perceptions of people experiencing food poverty, so that they are no longer the 'stranger'.

5 Key Issues

The following emerged from this project as in need of further exploration:

- How can technology enhance reciprocity, communication and building connections in the community? Other research (Tucker et al, 2015) on those suffering from mental health disorders have found that social media can replicate off-line peer support and can build close-knit communities. It should be explored how/whether this might work for isolated groups who may not have access to internet or other digital technologies.
- How can communities be helped/supported to bring about their desired change in a world where structures are perceived as rigid and divisive?
- Cultural Animation methodologies were useful in conducting the research. It is now necessary to explore how one can orchestrate multiple voices/acts in an inclusive/democratic way, while assuming the authorial position in writing academic papers.
- How can we retain the humanity perceived as essential in supporting people in food poverty as society becomes increasingly digitized?

6. Next Steps

- Conference contributions reporting on the findings of this project have been well received. We are now in the process of completing two journal articles to disseminate the findings of this research project to the academic community. These will focus on the methodological contribution and our understanding of the lived experience of food poverty and its relationship with the digital sphere.
- Continue to develop existing/new relationships to explore the potential to develop digital technology to address the findings of this report. For example, contact has been made with the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to discuss a user driven app to support people in developing food skills and confidence.
- To continue working alongside the local community to develop their food mapping activity into a publicly available digital resource. To continue working with North Staffordshire Community Food Network to explore opportunities to develop activities to enhance the food environment in the local area and to facilitate connections through food.

7. Impact

a) The research and findings of the 'Beyond the Food Bank' project' have contributed to making food poverty and security a central theme of the recently launched research centre, Community Animation and Social Innovation Centre (CASIC) at Keele University (<https://www.keele.ac.uk/casic/>). Both PI and CI are founding members and sit on the CASIC steering committee.

b) In support of participant's aspiration to make food a community asset rather than individual privilege, funding was obtained to host a food festival in the local community. Part of the AHRC Connected Communities festival, the food festival was part of a two day event linking health and food.

The event entitled 'Local, local plates, local people', drew on the pot making traditions of the area to make connections between local people and their food.

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/casic/connectedcommunitiesfestival/foodfestival/>

Prior to the festival, workshops were held in various locations and with local community groups, encouraging people to share their experiences of food and using this as inspiration to decorate their own plates.

The technical team behind the Keele Active Virtual Environment (KAVE) created a 3D installation of the plates, combining images with songs, voices and discussion from the workshops. A version of this is now available on line as an interactive game see:

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/pharm-docs/platesWebBuild.html>

The food festival attracted 600 guests and activities included:

- Community chef providing cooking demonstrations on the theme of cooking on a budget
- Stand and information from the local food bank
- Vegetable puppet making
- Demonstrations from a community bread making project, fruit pressing, smoothie making, porridge project, allotment society etc.

For a press release about the event please see:

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/pressreleases/2015/localfoodlocalplateslocalpeople.html>

The event was also recorded on Storify, see:

<https://storify.com/KeeleMngtSchool/local-food-local-plates-local-people>

c) A grant application has been submitted in conjunction with Stoke-on-Trent foodbank and local community gardeners to Big Local in support of a community service to collect and redistribute surplus fresh produce.

c) The PI is a founding member of North Staffs Community Food Network. This is a group formed to take forward many of the food aspirations identified in this project.

d) Application to be made as part of North Staffordshire's bid to *Building Better Opportunities Fund*, bringing together a wide range of local groups to secure funding and develop projects to enhance skills and employment opportunities and grow food related activity in the local area.

e) The New Vic Theatre has been commissioned to devise and deliver a training course for food bank volunteers. The focus of the training is to enable volunteers to capture guests' stories with the aim of changing the perception of food banks and people who use them in the wider population. Digital technologies are a key part of the capturing and broadcasting of these stories.

8. Dissemination

- Presentations at academic conferences:
 - 9th International Critical Management Studies Conference: Is there an Alternative?, Leicester, 7-10 July 2015. Surman, E., Kelemen, M and Moffat, S. 'Local communities in crisis: food poverty in Stoke-on-Trent'
 - 7th International Social Innovation Research Conference (ISIRC), University of York, 6-8th Sept 2015. Surman, E., Kelemen, M and Moffat, S. 'Using Cultural Animation techniques to explore the human and the digital in food poverty'.
- Presentation at CCN+ annual event in Leeds, December, 2014 (Surman, E.)
- Presentation of findings to Sixteen Films, researching the area of welfare, sanctions, food banks (Surman, E.).

- Two journal articles currently under development, one to be submitted to *Journal of Management Inquiry* and one to *Human Relations*
- Material from the 'Beyond the food bank' project is being exhibited at 'Look and Look again: Keele's community based research'. An exhibition, hosted by ArtsKeele and the Community Animation and Social Innovation Centre (CASIC) in October 2015. The exhibition is open to the general public.

9. Funding

AHRC grant: '*Animating Local Appetites: a celebration of community food and health in Stoke-on-Trent*'. Prof M Kelemen (PI), Dr E Surman (CI), and Prof R Fischman (CI), part of the Connected Communities Festival, 25th and 28th June, 2015 (£14, 658).

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