

Navigating Storms

Learning from Covid-19 food experiences

'Food Vulnerability During Covid-19' Participatory Panel
Edited by Gavin Aitchison and Jane Perry



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Executive summary

As the Covid-19 crisis unfolded, one fact quickly became clear: we were all navigating the same storms, but we were not all in the same boat. This innovative, collaborative project discovers the truth about what leaves people at risk of not being able to access enough, suitable, quality food – especially how this intensified during the Covid-19 outbreak – and what might be done to improve things in the future.

Challenges to food security are not, of course, limited to times to crisis. Government research shows that, even prior to the pandemic, one in twelve of all households in the UK were experiencing low or very low levels of food security. However, the number of adults who are food insecure in Britain was estimated to have quadrupled under the initial Covid-19 lockdown (March-April 2020).*

Over 2020-21, the 'Food Experiences during Covid-19' project brought together people from Cornwall, Newcastle, Oxford, York, Glasgow, Blackburn, Cardiff and Belfast – to hear their personal experience of difficulties in accessing food during the pandemic. Working together as a small group over a sustained period has enabled us to build up a unique picture of what is important to each Panel member based on their own experience and extensive contact with their communities.

As the Panel have shared, clear pictures have emerged of the worries faced by people in trying to secure access to food. Strikingly, the greatest difficulties were faced by those that we, as a society, should be most determined to support and protect: children with additional needs and households already facing poverty, wider challenges of sickness, disability or aging.

The opening phase of the Panel focused on the immediate Covid-19 lockdowns (spring 2020 – summer 2021), particularly around access to food. Panel members vividly recalled their fear and anxiety, particularly in the initial lockdown when supermarket shelves suddenly emptied and wider concerns about infection made shopping suddenly much more challenging. Many turned to online shopping, only to find delivery slots were "impossible" to secure during the immediate crisis. Families who already struggled with food costs, because of low wages or benefits, sometimes found it particularly difficult to access food. Not only were many of the strategies, such as 'shopping around' to get the best prices, no longer possible, but they were unable to 'buy themselves out of the crisis' by resorting to more expensive options.

As the pandemic developed, the Panel continued to share ongoing experiences, focusing on three themes identified through the wider research. Through their first-hand accounts, this report explores:

- How hard it was to be identified as 'extremely clinically vulnerable' and directed to 'shield', but also the worry and difficulties for those who felt they needed such additional protection and support but did not receive it.
- The challenges and additional costs of having school-age children at home full-time, as well as the various free school meals replacement schemes put in place.
- The stresses, as well as the joys, experienced by those involved in community food projects and their concerns about their increasing role.

Most concerningly, Panel members spoke about how these difficulties overlapped with, and often compounded, wider struggles with their physical and mental health, as well as the additional challenges of increased social isolation. A particular issue which emerged strongly

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* [Family Resources Survey: Financial Year 2019 to 2020](https://www.gov.uk) on www.gov.uk.
[New: UC Leaves 43% without Enough for Food](https://www.church-poverty.org.uk) at www.church-poverty.org.uk.
[Vulnerability to Food Insecurity since the Covid-19 Lockdown](https://www.church-poverty.org.uk) by Rachel Loopstra, Food Foundation, 14 April 2020.

Food security is a basic human right: nobody should have to face genuine fear that they will not be able to access healthy food

was the intense pressure experienced by families where one or more members had additional needs as they sought to adjust to life in lockdown, and the particular ways they felt let down by “one-size-fits-all” support which was not always able to take their particular needs into account.

Panellists’ experiences make them well placed to suggest how policy-makers, at all levels, could deliver better for those most at risk, not only in crises but at all times. Overall, the Panel have identified five overarching lessons:

1. **Hear directly from those who know:** Participation is key – it is vital that policy and systems are based on direct engagement with real people with lived experience. National and local governments must engage with people with experience to understand what ordinary people need. Working with those who are most affected can help those making decisions understand the challenges “from the inside-out” and then act on that insight.
2. **Food security is a fundamental human right:** Nobody should have to fear that they will not be able to access healthy food. Systems must be designed from that non-negotiable starting point. It is essential that everyone’s access to good food is safeguarded, but particular regard needs to be given to people who rely on support from others or whose circumstances place them at greater risk of being left behind in a crisis, such as children and people with additional needs.
3. **Rethink ‘social security’ so it truly offers sufficient support, at all times:** Ensuring benefits and work provide adequate, reliable income is the best way to protect and assist people, in ‘normal times’ and in a crisis. In particular, this means making the temporary increase in Universal Credit rates permanent, and making sure those on other ‘legacy’ benefits do not miss out. Make sure everyone gets the help they require, clearing the roadblocks so everyone knows and receives what they are entitled to.
4. **Crisis responses must be comprehensive, without compromising on dignity and choice:** We must trust people to know and do what is best for them and their families, rather than imposing inflexible top-down rules or solutions. Communication must be simple and accessible to all, so everyone receives the support they need. And the system must be transparent, so we all know where money has been spent.
5. **Individual households, communities, businesses and the state each have different strengths and roles, in a crisis and longer-term:** We need to strike an effective balance, allowing each to deliver what is needed and to function well. Society should rightly celebrate the value of neighbourhood responses, but also respect the limits of community efforts, especially those which rely on volunteers. To guarantee that nobody is cut adrift, we also need effective local government.

Who we are and why we're doing this

This report is based on people's real-life experiences during the pandemic, testimonies spanning from spring 2020 to the reintroduction of restrictions in early 2021.

In these pages, you'll hear directly or indirectly from Panel members Cath, Cath, Dawn, Gemma, Jayne, Mary, Monica, Norma, Penny, Shaun, Suzy, Sydnie, Sonia and others who have chosen not to be named. The Panel members have been joined by the research team, namely Barbora, Ben, Felicity, Gav, Hannah, Jane and Niall.

We've all contributed to Panel discussions, phone calls and Zoom chats, logging in from around the UK. This has been a truly collaborative piece of research, bringing together strengths and expertise of participants, Church Action on Poverty and the University of Sheffield.

Along the way, we've got to know one another. Our pandemic experiences are varied. Some are parents, some have family members who require additional support, some are not as well as we'd like and some had to shield. Some Panel members were already involved in neighbourhood food projects. All of us want things to be better.

When asked what made Panel members want to take part, here are some of the things people said:

"I would like to see a fairer society."

"I will always want to be involved in anything that listens to other experiences... I want to learn and I want to see if there's anything I can do that might be able to help in any way."

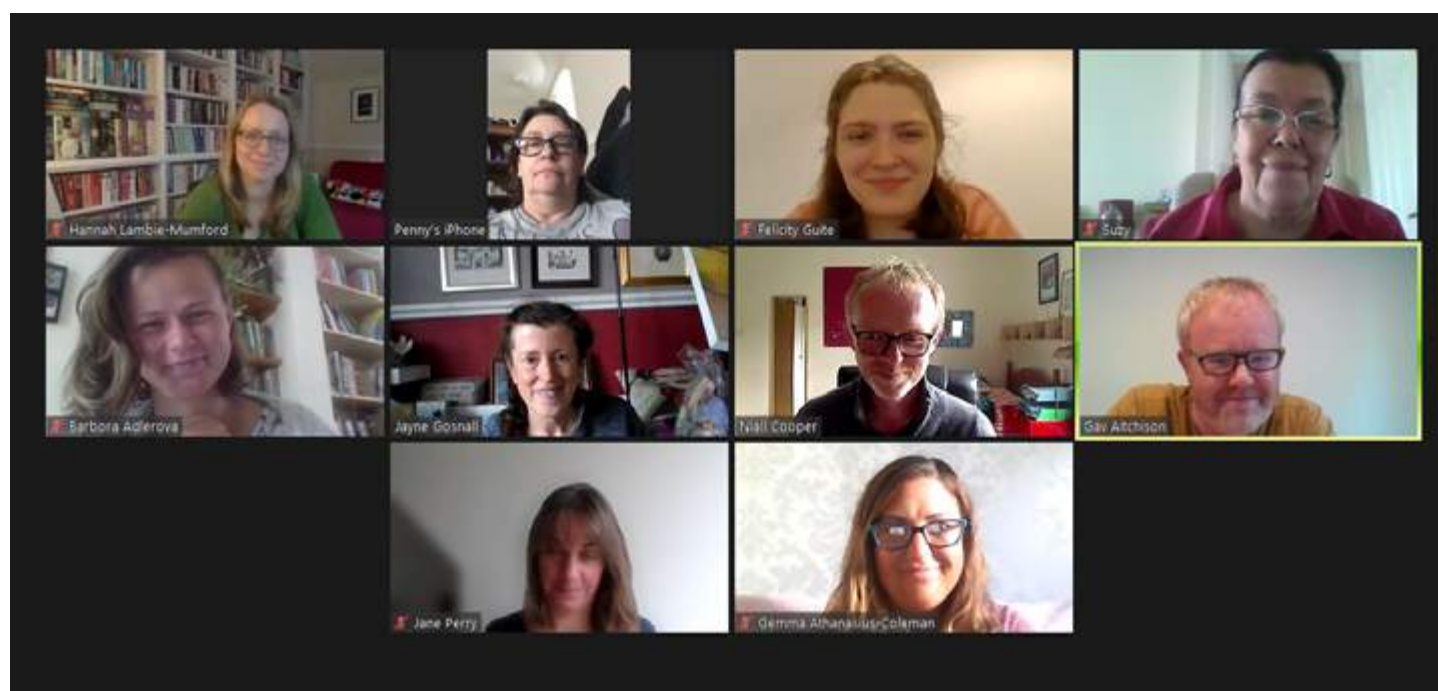
"Because I've had my own journey through poverty and food poverty, and I'm still on that to some extent. That might bring with it some things that are interesting or different ways of looking at it but I know, certainly, that being in a group of people who've got all sorts of different experiences will bring a voice that quite often isn't heard or is looked at in a patronising or a condescending way, a way that is wrong."

"I want us to be able to get the word out about food poverty, and I would like the government to listen."

"I want to see the people in power realise how much they could change, if they wanted to. They need to step back and look at things from other people's point of view more"

This report sets out some of the issues we discussed, the insights that came from our discussions, and our views on what should be done differently in future.

We asked the Panel to introduce themselves – see overleaf.



Penny

Penny is a campaigner with lived experience of poverty. She has worked in a variety of commercial and community kitchens. Her previous campaigning experience includes working with Food Power and End Hunger UK. Her house (garden in a pandemic) is always open for anyone who needs food.

Cath Walsh

Cath is an artist and an activist who is passionate about a number of causes, including inclusive education, period poverty, food poverty and mental health. She has trained and worked as a care worker, balancing part-time work with caring for her family.

Monica

Monica is born and bred Oxford; she currently works as a service development project worker for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, something that she has personal experience of. She is involved in Good Food Oxford and has become an active campaigner on food poverty.

Jayne

Jayne is an expert by experience based in Salford. She has been in recovery since 2012, something that she speaks openly about. She is very active in supporting other people in recovery or who are experiencing poverty, abuse or other difficulties. She is passionate about how the food we eat impacts our bodies and the planet.

Shaun

Shaun is a writer who has been part of a local writing group for eight years. He used to work in property management but has been retired for about 11 years now. He recently contributed to a poetry anthology exploring the issues of poverty and lockdown.

Norma

Norma is self-employed and lives with her husband and a small daughter in a big Northern Irish city. Since graduating in business studies she's been involved in a number of food enterprises, including running her own shop, writing about food or running cookery classes. She has lived and worked in different countries around the world.

Mary

Mary is an artist who organises community art projects in York. She is co-chair of the York Food Justice Alliance and has been involved in running a zero-waste food project. She is also a carer for her adult son and is passionate about the rights of adults with additional needs.

Sydney

Sydney has been involved in activism and various community projects around food poverty for a few years, including running a zero-waste market/food project, facilitating a community art project, running a baby group, lots of media work, and co-chairing a Food Justice Alliance. Sydney is passionate about making a better society for her children.

Dawn

Dawn was born in East Lancashire to a lower working-class family of activists. Although growing up in poverty she had a beautiful upbringing in a close-knit community. She now works freelance in mental health and suicide prevention, after careers in youth and social work, yet even now feels the stigma poverty brings.

Gemma

Gemma is an activist/campaigner who is very active in her local community in Cornwall. Over the years she has been involved in a number of community food projects, often with a focus on making use of surplus food and reducing food waste. She is currently doing a Masters degree in Sustainable Development.

Suzy

Suzy is passionate about food, cooking and helping people 'to feed a lot with not a lot' which comes from her experience of raising a family of two adults and four children on benefits. She used to volunteer for a local food bank and now is part of a scrutiny group run by her housing association.

Cath Wallace

Cath is a mother and grandmother; she's lived in Glasgow all her life and has been a carer since the age of 19. Around 10 years ago she became involved in the Poverty Truth Commission; she's now no longer afraid to tell people how poor she was, and is a fighter for a fairer society.

Some of the original Panel preferred not to be named – their stories are included anonymously or using a pseudonym.

Initial lockdown – March–June 2020

The pandemic caused immense hardship, but this was not experienced equally. We were not all in the same boat. Those who were well off were able to ride out the economic elements of the storm, while people who had already been struggling to stay afloat were more likely to struggle or to be overwhelmed. The latter included many of our Panel members, who recounted their experiences and emotions across a wide range of issues.

Physical access to food: pressure, anxiety and empty shelves

“The first lockdown was seriously bad ... there was no food in the supermarkets and what have you, and it was a case of: ‘We’ve got this, we can make something out of it.’”

“Prior to lockdown we’d started making homemade food like lasagne, shopping in Lidl and Iceland – they’re the main two because they’re the best ones, especially Iceland for feeding a lot of people at the same time. So we just started getting more into cooking and making our own stuff. Then as soon as the lockdown, and all the fresh stuff was nowhere to be seen, everyone had already taken that by the time we went shopping, so it was just more frozen food and whatever there was.”

Wider concerns about infection made the ordinary, everyday activity of shopping suddenly much more challenging, particularly for parents. (See also pages 12 and 15.)

“I look more at the atmosphere in the supermarkets particularly. There is definitely a lot of pressure there. You can see it in the way people react, I think, and to each other... I think the atmosphere in the shops is very different. There is a certain sense of crisis there somewhere.”

I go on Tesco, Asda, and Iceland,

and there are no delivery slots

on any of them for at least

three weeks. So you have to go out

The first lockdown

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in the supermarkets

Online shopping: hard to access, and impossible for some

“There were no delivery slots. I go on Tesco, Asda, and Iceland, and there are no delivery slots on any of them for at least three weeks. So you have to go out.”

“My Nan had to learn how to do all her online shopping, and not being able to show her physically how to do it and having to text her about it and try and understand what button she’s on about, what pop-ups she’s on about and things like that.

I think she got more of the hang of it, learning how to use online shopping and things like that.”

Economic access: budgets were already at breaking point

Some families already on low incomes found it particularly difficult to access food.

“We went into lockdown on Monday 23rd March... We get paid on a Tuesday, so then on that Monday everyone went shopping and bought everything, and we went on Tuesday and it was just like nothing basically, and delivery slots online had just gone down to nothing, none available whatsoever.”

Many routine strategies, such as “shopping around” to get the best prices, were no longer available to people, and they were unable to “buy themselves out of the crisis” because the only options left were too expensive for them to be able to afford.

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Challenges of low income: exacerbated by 'digital divide'

“There wasn't the food there to access, there wasn't the money to access it. You're talking about somebody on benefits – if you don't have digital access you can't do an order online, you don't have the money to do an order online because your orders have to be of a certain amount of money before they'll accept them. So it was money, digital exclusion, the lack of food.”

Wider factors

Panel members cited other challenges as well. Ill-health made it harder for some people to manage, or to get to shops, whether shielding or not. People with caring responsibilities, whether for someone in their household or a relative who they would usually have visited or supported, found things particularly hard.

The impact on mental health was significant, with many people reporting increased anxiety, loneliness, depression and fear – for themselves and in their community.

Families with children or with adults requiring additional support experienced particular difficulties, in ways that are examined more fully on pages 14–15.

Silver linings

Panel members did identify positives during the pandemic. There was widespread satisfaction at the way communities came together, stepping up to provide support. In some areas, there was an outpouring of kindness and sometimes more volunteers than were required.

Individual Panel members enjoyed cooking, sharing with neighbours and reported enjoying and valuing food more. There were signs that the chaos and uncertainty of later lockdowns were less severe than in the first, perhaps suggesting support systems had become established and smoother. However there were also concerns that many people were finding it difficult to ask for or accept help that was clearly needed. Concerns were raised about hidden crises and a persistent view that community projects had a finite capacity that was close to being reached or breached.

Some words about words: what are we talking about?

Our project concerns the entire food system – all the things that go into getting food to our plates, from growers and farmers through food processing, delivery, shops and supermarkets, as well as the money we use to buy food. We are particularly interested in how those systems, which we all rely on, held up during the Covid crisis.

Even before Covid, many Panel members had experience of the fragility of the food system and of being at risk of not being able to get enough, suitable food (known as ‘food insecurity’). During the pandemic, lack of access to food was also sometimes referred to as ‘food vulnerability’.

Several were on low incomes and had sometimes had to go without food. Others had earlier life experience of real concern about feeding themselves or their families. They and others were also involved in local food programmes, so had a profound understanding of barriers to food access in their communities, and their causes.

Early in this project, we discussed the way the issues are talked about. We asked Panel members:

- What do terms like ‘food insecurity’, ‘food poverty’ or ‘food vulnerability’ mean to you and your community?
- Does language reflect people’s experiences?
- What language would you use? What would you avoid? What makes sense to you?

Here are some excerpts from the ensuing conversations:

I don’t like the term ‘food poverty’.... I prefer ‘insecurity’, because none of us know what’s going to happen.

The thing is, when people say ‘poverty’, it’s really hitting because, you know, who do you class as poverty? You’ve got people that are on benefits that are in insecurity, you’ve got people that have low-income wage that are insecure. You’ve got people that are working maybe two, three jobs that are still struggling to keep a roof and food in there. So, you know, who do you class in that situation? It’s people that are insecure in their finances. You know, some people are working three or four jobs a time.

Yes, I prefer ‘insecurity’ because none of us have got a crystal ball.

I think people tend to use more personal terms, like they’re “anxious” or “stressed”. Talk about their mental health in ordinary terminology rather than the wider umbrella words, so to speak. I’m clearly not great with words, but I do try. We use ‘food insecurity’ and we use ‘hidden hunger’ ourselves more than anything.

I think the word ‘struggle’ comes up a lot. Obviously, York is kind of mixed, so you think of it as being an affluent area. All the massive houses, the jobs and everything. There is a massive divide and there’s not much in the middle. Behind those walls of the city people really are struggling. I think this is a word people tend to come to us and use in their email and say, “We’re struggling. We can’t afford this, we can’t afford that...” Language and terminology doesn’t get thrown around that much in everyday living, does it? It’s not until you start writing it down you start having to think about how.

I’m always talking about ‘experience’. I think people when they’re talking about it, they don’t really want to admit that they’ve experienced it. They don’t really use that word when they talk about it, they just try and talk about other people around them. I try to tell them their circumstances are quite normal now and it’s okay to feel how you feel. Then more people would feel comfortable talking about their experience as well.

So what do you both think of the phrase 'food vulnerability'? Would you relate to that?

I am not as keen on that, and the reason I say that is because I know a lot of people who have got mental health problems or addiction issues, hate to be described as 'vulnerable' ... the implication that you are vulnerable is, again, taking your agency away from you. It suggests you are somebody who has to be given to. In actual fact, people who are struggling to get access to food and choice of food may be incredibly resourceful, and incredibly resilient. They are just in very disadvantaged circumstances because of policy and society.

I think 'vulnerable' is another, sort of, word that can be misheard. You think of vulnerable and you think of people who are weak maybe and not strong enough to, sort of, do their own thing, but they are, and that's not always fair. Most of these people who are vulnerable are actually very strong and resourceful.

It is maybe an opportune time to use some really carefully chosen words. I am very much of the view that, in a rich country, it is policy to have poor people, that that is a disadvantage that is imposed upon people, and is a decision. But I very much never want to hear people judged or any sort of stigmatising or weighted language.

A sense there about being talked down to, would that be correct?

Oh, a lot of condescending language, very patronising.

Yes, if they stopped calling people 'claimants', because you will notice it has always been 'claimants', until somebody loses their job because of Covid and then, "They have had to apply for Universal Credit, poor them." Everybody else has been a 'claimant', which means a taker. So get rid of language like that.

With our food bank we don't call it a food bank... We call it Adriano's Zero Waste Supermarket, because it is zero waste food, it's food that would go in the bin. It started off people coming because they liked the idea of it. Now it's people, apart from one or two who come and grab the end of the day bargains, who really need it. They know it's a food bank, but it's never advertised as such.

I think it's really good to have things like that. I spoke to a girl who's volunteering at one in London and they call that the Social Supermarket. I feel like it takes a lot away from the stigma of the embarrassment of going to a food bank.

I think that helps change the language as well. Thinking about it now, we do talk about zero waste rather than food bank. Even when we collect food from people or they have it, they say, "Thank you so much, it's nice not to see it put in landfill." I think people are starting to move away a tiny bit from using the words 'food bank', 'poverty', 'struggling'.

I think that's really good. As soon as anyone hears food bank, they think embarrassment, bad, not somewhere people actually want to go. When you call it a zero-waste supermarket, everyone who doesn't want to waste food accepts that's what it is. It's not just poor people who can't afford to eat, it's people who need help. I think a lot of people do judge the word 'food bank' a lot.



Gemma

Gemma is studying for a masters in sustainable development. She grew up in Bradford but now lives in Cornwall, where she is involved in several local projects. She has a son and a daughter, and receives benefit payments to help with the care of her daughter, who has autism.

Different communities

To an outsider, Newquay looks amazing. You come on holiday and it is just stunning. People move here to live the dream but in reality there is a lot of deprivation, homelessness and drug use. There is not enough work, all seasonal, minimum wage pretty much and the

cost of living is really high.

Hospitality is a big employer here, and with that being shut, there was so much more unemployment. Here, people couldn't work from home because they literally couldn't work.

Newquay has more of a community feel than where I grew up, because it is smaller. In the winter, it can be really depressing here because normally you are out of work, there are a lot of people signing on and not enough jobs or transport. You can feel very isolated, but the community pulls together. The same happened in the Covid lockdown.

Charities have grown to fill a gap. They are still delivering large amounts of food parcels as I write. I don't see how this is going to be sustainable in the long term. They can't keep giving out food forever.

Why I got involved

I have not lived as severely as some people, but I have fallen on hard times and I have had to make things work. So I know how it feels.

I find it hard, knowing there are injustices and doing nothing about it. That's why I got involved and why I am doing the master's, because that is about the environment and that is another thing I feel quite strongly about. I don't think everybody speaks up enough about what goes on. If I can highlight that and something can change, then that would be my ultimate goal, really. Just make a difference in my local area.

My own pandemic experiences

When lockdown first happened, I wasn't so much worried about the money, more about how I was going to get food. Cornwall is tucked in the corner, and I thought, "What if the food doesn't get through?"

Also I was frightened about going shopping. When you are on your own with two children, you don't really want to be taking them into the supermarket when there is a pandemic, especially in the beginning when we didn't know much about it. I felt nervous. I couldn't leave them at home, I couldn't leave them in the car. There were no online delivery slots. The minute lockdown got announced, they just got booked up for six, eight weeks.

So I could only go shopping once a week when they were at their dad's house. I had to plan all week around that one shopping trip, whereas I was used to doing a top-up shop whenever I needed to. I used to get quite nervous about running out of stuff – especially with my daughter being particular about what she will eat. Then things did get a bit better. I got into a routine, making meals, planning things. Then I got worried that they weren't eating healthily enough. There was a lot of anxiety around that time, I think.

The free school meal vouchers have been a lifesaver. When they are at home they eat so much more than they do at school, so £15 a week each of vouchers has been a big help. We have a Community Fridge here that I have used a couple of times, and the orchard where I volunteer grows fruit and vegetables, so in summer I went every week and got a free veg box.

Access to food is central to everything

The most important thing for me is for politicians to realise that access to food is central to everything. It's not really just about eating; it's about connecting people and giving people a way to integrate in the community as well.

I would say to look at the situation as a whole. The huge housing crisis (shortage and extortionate prices) in Cornwall is having a knock on effect and is pushing people further into debt and poverty and increasing the need to rely on food handouts. There is not only an issue around food, there is an issue with the whole system. It is all about fairness and equality. Everyone has a right to live a certain standard of living. There shouldn't be such a gap between rich and poor.

**Access to
food is
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everything**

Penny

Penny lives with her daughter in Byker, Newcastle. She volunteers with local projects and is an active campaigner in her city, across the UK, and internationally, including speaking to a House of Lords committee, national media outlets, and a global conference on hunger.

For a long time, I wasn't involved in campaigning at all. I was working, sometimes over 70 hours a week, just to pay the bills and then Heather's little bit of dole money was buying the food.

A few years ago we opened a community café in Byker, and I started talking to people. That's where I started to get more into activism and now we've done massive amounts.

For a lot of people, the problem at first was the lack of food access

The first lockdown was seriously bad, the amount of food that wasn't in supermarkets was horrendous. I did a paper with the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University, part of that research was the people that had nothing were the ones that knew how to cope without anything. People who hadn't been in that position suffered more.

My daughter and I do our shopping online now because getting to the shops is not the easiest. The first lockdown it was hard to get a slot, but because Heather works for the NHS we had that advantage. On the second lockdown, we never had to queue to get into a supermarket. I don't know whether it's a case of they did it differently or people just didn't give a monkey's.

Going to the cash and carry every couple of weeks is fine because there's so few people in there. I buy things that are reduced from there most of the time anyway, so I'm still stopping stuff going into landfill and all of that but it's stuff that I want.

If you're on benefits or don't have digital access, then you can't do an order online or don't have the money, because orders have to be over a certain amount. Money, digital exclusion and the lack of food were big issues.

The impact in Byker

There were less places to go. Even just Wetherspoon's – people say it's only Wetherspoon's, but that's a lifeline for some people. You can go in, you can talk to people and have a refillable cuppa that can last you all day. You've got their heating, their hot water, you're not using your fuel. And yes, the food's not massively good, but sometimes it's cheaper than buying the stuff in and cooking it, and people need company. There's more sides to healthy than healthy food.

Now there's going to be more people needing food banks and food assistance. People have lost their jobs, and so many places have closed that there's less available in the job market, so there will be more unemployment.

It's about being open and honest and encouraging other people to do it

People are still not getting fed, there's still poverty, it still needs to be shouted about. I'm an expert by experience. That sums me up. I'm a campaigner, but I'm also a person with lived experience. I want to make sure lessons are learnt. From the first lockdown to the second, they learnt slightly, but the Government just didn't bloody listen in the first place and had to backtrack, especially on the free school meals.

One of my key messages would be: listen to the people that work on the ground. I see it, I'm in with it, I know how it's going, but I also know how to speak to a politician, where some people don't have the confidence for that.



For a lot of people, the problem at first was the lack of food access. Money, digital exclusion and the lack of food were big issues.

Community food

Many of the Panel were involved in local food projects before Covid and so well placed to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of community food responses in times of crisis.

There's three
of us in our
local food
justice alliance,
and it's really
hard work...
we could just
go under
any minute

For further discussion

Individual households, communities, businesses and the state (locally and nationally) each have different strengths and roles to play, in a crisis and longer-term – how can we strike an effective balance allowing each to deliver what is needed and function well?

“Much more than the food parcels”

Panel members were keen to emphasise the power and value of local projects. Eating together and sharing food creates a distinctive camaraderie, and relationships reduce stigma and enhance support. Volunteering increases a sense of purpose and self-worth. For some, the opportunity to be involved in tackling food waste and encouraging healthy eating was also significant.

“Covid came along and straight away, the community, sort of, pulled together.”

When Covid hit, communities responded. Informal support groups emerged among family, friends and neighbours. More coordinated local ‘mutual aid’ groups also emerged, although there were some reservations about their genuineness and effectiveness. Many existing local groups adapted and increased activity.

Community responses were perceived as ‘natural’. Communities have long come together, both in ‘ordinary times’ and in a crisis. The Panel felt projects already “on the ground” were well placed to plug gaps in statutory provision, more in touch with local needs and better able to harness and channel local support. However, some felt this raised significant questions:

“There seemed to be no plan in place to tackle something like this. Sense of panic.

Government tried, but also seemed to be telling people to do things themselves.”

When they did occur, more formal responses were felt to be either too limited (such as the Government increasing only certain benefits), too slow (such as the delays in providing furlough payments), or inadequate (such as the paucity of many school meal replacements).

Transforming into a frontline crisis response raised new operational challenges for many community groups, such as ensuring Covid-secure collection and delivery methods. Many projects’ supply chains were vulnerable and there were limits to what local responses could achieve. Panel members took pride in the agility and compassion groups displayed, but some were concerned about having the responsibility of negotiating who was eligible for support. Others raised issues about funding and transparency of resourcing, sensing that community groups were left ‘to get on with it’:

“We’ve never received any Covid money for the whole year that I’ve been doing it....a few of local projects have, but it’s mainly the food banks....stuff that was well established, which is fair enough... the little projects, that were tending to do a lot more, were the ones that tended to not get anything.”

“It’s exhausting...”

Stresses emerged within projects, such as around ensuring people’s safety, PPE access, and volunteers’ own health and vulnerability. These exacerbated pre-existing logistical challenges, leading to difficult quandaries, up to and including closure of projects.

Some projects were at full capacity or beyond, taking a heavy toll on volunteers mentally and physically. Several said it was “difficult to find a balance”, feeling like they had “never done enough” or could not take time off. The relationships which are a strength of neighbourhood projects also meant it was hard not to become absorbed in or affected by the problems of others:

“It’s tough. It’s a heavy emotional load as well as the food. There’s a lot more going on behind the scenes by the people who are there seven days a week, making food and checking that people are okay.”

“We shouldn’t have to do this”

Questions were raised about who should respond to issues of food access and security in a crisis, and how:

“...the communities stepped in where government and council never stepped in. Where would we be without these local groups? We’d be in a sorry, sorry state, but then does that mean that the council and government will say, ‘Why should we bother when these groups are doing it themselves?’ That’s my worry.”

Panel members felt community projects ‘had to’ step up as nobody else would, and said it seemed “better to do it ourselves” because “politicians don’t understand the real issues” or the local need. This was traced to a feeling that policymakers were detached from everyday lives and concerns. There was consensus that charities and communities were filling a gap that shouldn’t be there:

“people need more money to afford what they need. ALL incomes should keep pace with inflation.”

This led to a call for the Government to reduce the need for emergency food in ‘normal times’, to provide emergency support if needed, and to support community groups to both prevent and respond to need.

The Panel also stressed the need for a joined-up response, as “no one group can do it all”. Projects need to be connected to each other and to ‘official’ provision. Agreement on who should do what was not easy to achieve, however there was greatest consensus on the role of local Government. The Panel felt councils should create and strengthen links between local projects, and support activities that respond to food poverty with dignity and choice.

Mary in York

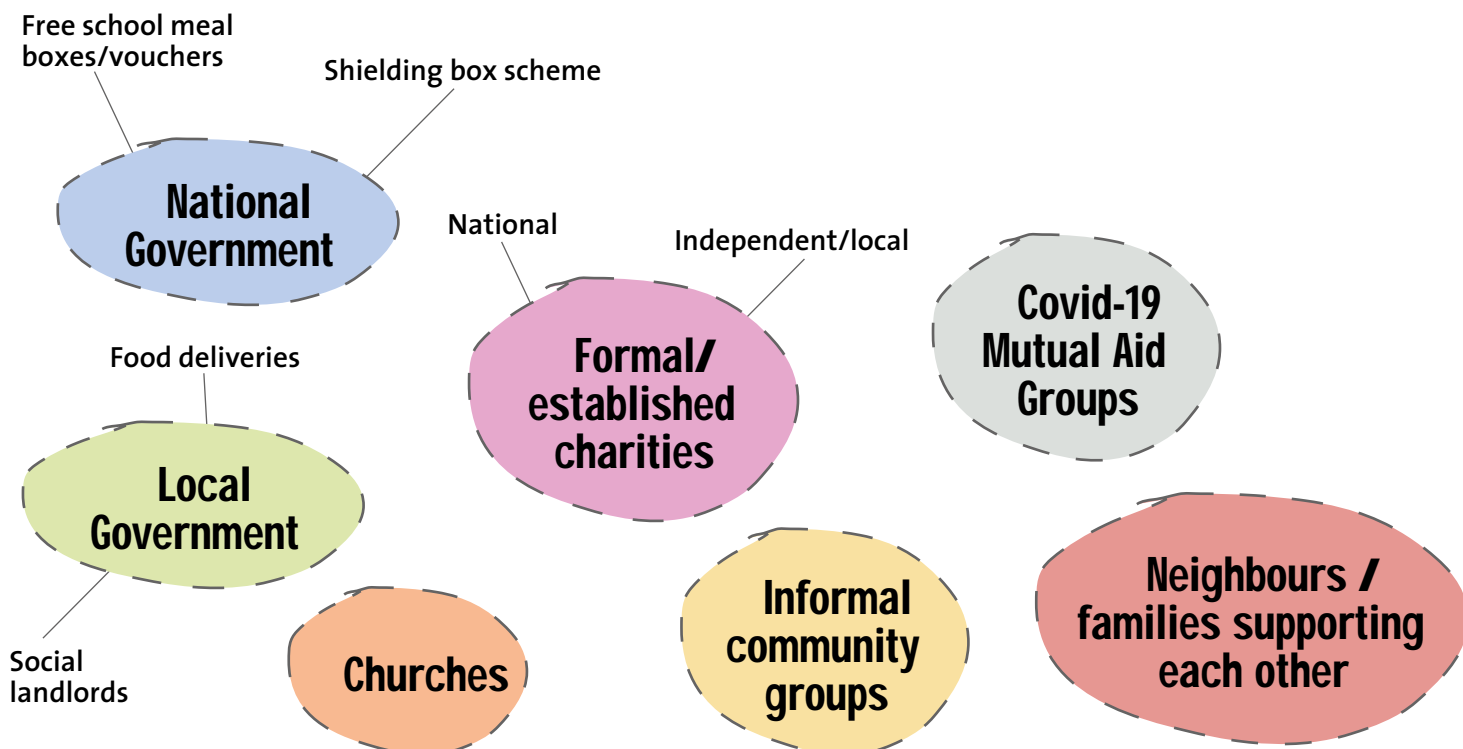
“There’s three of us in our local food justice alliance, and it’s really hard work. I don’t mind and I’m happy to support people because it is horrible to see anybody stuck but knowing we needed help. Our petrol bill is a killer. We’re kind of the blind leading the blind because I’m supposed to shield, Sydnie’s supposed to shield and my partner who does the delivery in the night time when nobody’s looking, he’s only got one lung because he’s recovering from cancer. We’re a bit – we could just go under any minute.”



Gemma in Cornwall

“I think just by looking at what the community’s been doing is showing that there’s a gap. Like, these people have come along and said, ‘This is a gap and we’re filling it.’ So, by celebrating what the community’s doing, that’s showing the areas where there should be more support in a way. So, in a way, I mean that’s true, and the fact that we pull together has, sort of, paved what the policy should maybe look like in a way. It’s almost like a roadmap. You know, no-one knew where they were going, but this situation happened and these little, I don’t know, projects happened, and that’s how they’ve, sort of, yes, kind of, grown from that.”

Support with access to food during Covid-19



Protecting those who need it most

Covid-19 presented a particular threat to people who were already ill or unwell. People deemed as ‘extremely clinically vulnerable’ were advised to ‘shield’ and people deemed ‘moderately clinically vulnerable’ were advised to leave home as little as possible (‘sheltering’). People already facing health challenges therefore became a large group at heightened risk of being unable to access food.

Key messages

1. Government should have given more timely and appropriate support, ensuring those who really needed practical support were identified and provided for, including people who might struggle to adapt to online shopping.
2. Strike an appropriate balance between standardisation (making sure the same standard of provision is available to all) and localisation (responding to local context):
 - standardising eligibility (who qualified for help) but localising identification of who needs support, including stressing a key role for GPs and referrals from local agencies.
 - standardising the basic offer (what people get) but localising delivery (how people are supported).
3. Improve the availability and clarity of communication to ensure people who need help can access it.
4. Physical box delivery is rarely, if ever, appropriate. In most situations, access to supermarket delivery slots was more important, complemented by cash grants where required.

The ‘extremely clinically vulnerable’ group were eligible for the Government’s food grocery box scheme, coordinated by national governments but with variations between the nations. Both ‘clinically vulnerable’ groups were offered priority delivery slots for online shopping, and retailers offered dedicated shopping hours for the ‘moderately vulnerable’. Additional support came from councils, social landlords, mutual-aid groups, charities, and community food providers including food banks.

“Petrified” – the impact of being instructed to ‘stay home’ exacerbated by lack of support

The Panel included people from households in a wide range of personal and family health situations. Many people found the experience extremely difficult and stressful, whether or not they received support. They spoke powerfully about debilitating isolation, compounding pressure, fear and anxiety. Several participants mentioned difficulties accessing supermarkets and/or deliveries, although there was a sense this later improved. Others described struggling to find people to help get shopping, feeling reticent about asking for help or difficulty physically accessing money to repay neighbours. Many therefore felt forced to be self-reliant, surviving on a bare minimum or going out reluctantly.

Particular concerns were raised about who “counted” as shielding and those “missing” from the lists:

“The people that were put on them didn’t need them and the people that weren’t getting them were the ones that actually could have done with them. That’s where a lot of the Mutual Aid sprung from, the fact that people weren’t able to do what they needed to do.”

For one Panel member, receiving emergency boxes was essential, as they “would have had nothing” otherwise. Others told of boxes being provided needlessly, including where an application had to be made just to access supermarket priority slots. We heard of parcel contents being passed to friends, neighbours or food banks.

Most food challenges discussed around shielding and sheltering involved physical access to shopping or money, rather than affordability, although one person felt trapped because they didn’t have money to ‘buy themselves out’ of the situation.

Was the support provided suitable?

“When the parcel was delivered, it was quite useless, the stuff you got. The help that was available wasn’t specific to dietary requirements and things like that. Like when the schools were giving the food, as helpful as it was, it didn’t always fit the bill.”

“It seemed like it almost would have been a lot easier to have a really quick basic grant system set up, where you are pointed to claim via that, and then people got that money to do what they will with, even if it’s given to people who can go shopping to go shopping for them.”

I found it very
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So, in that
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what are you
supposed
to do?

Suzy

Suzy from Cardiff has been active for several years in local food projects and neighbourhood groups. During Covid, she and her husband had to shield, and he had Covid.

Oh, the stress was terrible. I had serious depression; I've still got it now because my husband is still ill. We had five and a half months. We couldn't go outside the gate. He went to hospital; I didn't even know if he was coming back. I had to keep the isolation, to keep the house clean from virus for him to come back home. It's been a nightmare.

I feel a trauma of the isolation rising again in me. It still has an effect on me. That was from March to August 2020, and it still is affecting me.

I found it very difficult getting a slot to have a delivery; you'd have to wait four weeks. So, in that four weeks, what are you supposed to do? And even when I have had deliveries before, I've found it more expensive because when we go ourselves we get the reduced items and bargains.

We couldn't even go to the cashpoint to get money for extra food. It was a very, very hard time. We had to manage on what little money we had in the house and then our neighbours helped us until we were able to get out, and then we could pay them back.

I had help from the Breakfast Club; the lady there has been absolutely amazing. And then we had two members of our church, who are our friends, and we could ring them up and say what we needed, as long as I sanitised the money and put it in a bag.

They took our details to a local project, and they used to cook meals like chilli con carne and other stuff in plastic tubs, in the boxes with food, with your name on it. They would cook in the morning with whatever food they were given, and then they would portion it all up. And you would get like three days' meals in the box, and some other stuff, and toiletries. Food items were also delivered by my Housing Association.

Plus, with all the stuff that I had in the freezers already, we were able to mix and match.

It has all taught me a valuable lesson because now when I cook, I cook four meals – we eat two, we freeze two. I've invested in second-hand freezers and I'm gradually stocking them back up. I've also been able to help other people now. We've had vouchers through this project and by using that towards my shopping, I've been able to use other money to buy a second-hand freezer to help a friend and my godson.

Sydney

I would like to have had the support of shielding... I am on autoimmune drugs where, as it sounds, your autoimmune system is shocked, in a sense. I wasn't told I had to go into shielding. I was told to be extremely careful by my consultant, was told to stay in. He basically said, 'Don't get Covid, you are in trouble if you get it.' So I couldn't go into shielding, but I tried my hardest to stay away....

I couldn't get any delivery slots, which means I had to go shopping. Because I have got children, I can't go at the quiet times of day. I had a child that was struggling, who should have gone at a quieter time of the day because of her autism and couldn't. So it was difficult. I am also an unofficial carer for my mum... She also has extreme health conditions. Not just mobility conditions, but actual physical health conditions, where she should have been on that list. If she gets Covid, she will not come out of hospital and I can say that with a good 90-odd per cent chance. So she is scared. She is petrified and I have to go shopping for her because she couldn't get priority slots. She couldn't get any help off the council or the government.



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I was told to be extremely careful

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Families with children

Key messages

Key messages regarding provision for families with children centred around improving and extending entitlement and take up of support, to avoid children “falling through gaps”. Discussion also widened to more fundamental changes to the welfare system, ensuring all households had adequate income to meet children’s basic needs.

Families with children experienced the same food access difficulties as everyone else, but with extra challenges:

- Parents’ food bills rose as children were eating lunch and snacks at home instead of school.
- Families had to pay more for internet data for home-schooling and social interaction, and heating.
- Budgeting methods such as using multiple shops to get the best prices, or buying and cooking in bulk, were extremely difficult in lockdown.
- Some parents who did not have alternative childcare were turned away from supermarkets with their children, as retailers wanted people to shop alone.

“Budgeting – food is the first thing to go, it’s flexible (unlike electric, gas, etc).”

“Up here in Newcastle, there have been incidents where shops have refused to let people with children in the shops. Even if they say they are a single parent they turn them away from the shop, and that was Morrison’s.

...It is more so now actually. They have got signs now saying ‘One person per household.’ And I am a single parent. I do avoid going in, but sometimes you cannot avoid it. You cannot leave your children in the car. Well, I do not like to do it but I have done.”

Additional needs, but no additional support

The Panel’s strongest message concerned the significant challenges facing families who have children at home with additional needs, particularly autism or other sensory issues:

“It was really a nightmare, and the food wasn’t really lasting that long. You know, the vouchers didn’t really last that long because, you know, obviously, my kids have got autism. So, I have to buy special sort of food because my boys have got sensory issues with food. So, there’s only certain food they can eat, which was a lot more expensive than what it would be normally.”

“My daughter who is eight is autistic, so she has a very, very limited diet and she loves beige food. So, I got really frightened at first because she was going through a noodles phase, and I’m talking the cheap 22p noodles. And in the supermarket, she could only buy three packets at a time, it wasn’t enough. So, I was going around different supermarkets, kind of bulk-buying, because I was frightened that, if I ran out, she wouldn’t eat anything. She’s on jacket potatoes now, so that’s good.”

Budgeting – food is the first thing to go,

it’s flexible (unlike electric, gas, etc).

It was really a nightmare,

and the food wasn’t really lasting that long

Local variations

The Panel were concerned by the inconsistency of support. Panel members experienced “different schools doing different things and different areas doing different things”, including an example of a child changing schools locally, leading to a very different approach and level of support.

“I don’t understand why. Why can certain schools decide that they can give a voucher and others can’t? It’s just shocking, isn’t it?”

Parents who had received free school meal support appreciated it but raised concerns about the nature of the provision and the contents and quality of food parcels:

“The food parcels were exactly as bad as photographed when it hit the headlines with Marcus Rashford. They were awful. They didn’t offer choice. They weren’t what the children ate, and yes, indeed, in both cases, some of the children have sensory issues with their food.”

“I looked in the bag and I was, like, there’s a little block of cheese per child, a couple of slices of ham wrapped in cling film. Decent amount of fruit, five decent pieces of fruit and some yoghurts and some packets of biscuits all wrapped up. I thought, you can’t say I don’t want it. I take it because it buffers me buying extra bits and stuff.”

“They weren’t your five a day... They were nowhere near. Two carrots, two bits of fruit. And usually they were gone off, or near as good as gone off.”

The Panel’s biggest concern was around the lack of choice and flexibility, and the resultant waste:

“It’s just there’s no flexibility. There’s no talk about dietary, religious, or any other flexibility for whatever reason that you require different foods. Even when I inquired, the school did not know”

Voucher schemes that enabled choice and minimised waste were more welcome, but there were still difficulties, including accessing vouchers and finding the limited shops that would accept them.

Of greater concern were families who were struggling but who were left out of support systems, due to factors such as narrowly missing the income threshold, their Universal Credit status, or having children who were too old to qualify.

“In those families where they’re on a very low income, but haven’t previously qualified for free school meals, they’re getting hit. You know, they might have one earning parent on a relatively low income and they were doing well, but by being really resourceful, some of their choices have gone and some of the costs have gone up, but they don’t hit the threshold.”

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They weren’t your five a day...

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Two carrots, two bits of fruit.

And usually they were gone off,

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For further discussion

Stories from the Panel have revealed the particular struggles faced by families where children (aged under 16 and adult children) have additional needs – what can we learn about how to better support these children and their families in a crisis?

An unpredictable and unequal storm

“We are not all in the same boat. We are in the same storm. Some of us are on superyachts. Some of us have just the one oar.”

This April 2020 tweet by the author Damian Barr challenged the flawed early notion that the virus was somehow a great equaliser. What it actually did was reveal great social inequalities. As our work progressed, we developed a pattern of beginning sessions by sharing our latest experiences. This provided a point of reconnection, with each other and with our experiences. For some people, this was one of their few ‘live’ conversations with someone outside their immediate circle that day or week. The sense of being ‘in different boats’ was very real.

Shifting sands

When the project was conceived, late in what we now know was only the first wave of Covid, we had little idea how long the pandemic would continue. Retracing our conversations reveals a complex pattern of shifting sands, as Covid ebbed and flowed with different impact across different communities. Panel members became subject to differing local infection rates and restrictions. Wider research has now shown how communities were hit differently, as a result of inequalities in health, income and housing, often linked to ethnicity, gender and class.

For our Panel, this variation became increasingly hard to make sense of, as each household sought to navigate its own course through Covid, lockdowns, ill-health, caring and parenting responsibilities and differing job circumstances. Many found the winter hard, speaking of increased isolation and renewed concerns – or practical and emotional effort – in managing household budgets and securing food. Several members involved in community food projects spoke of increased struggle, particularly when many volunteers were required to isolate or simply needed a break.

Not ‘all in the same boat’

The sense of not being ‘all in the same boat’ continued when the Panel discussed the disparity in support in different areas, between and within the four nations of the UK. Panel members in Newcastle and York experienced variations between different schools in types of free school meal replacements. Others active in community networks across cities in the North of England commented on differences in mental health and social care provision between local authorities.

Participants felt strongly about variations in financial support, highlighting the value of the uplift in Universal Credit but highlighting that it was not extended to people receiving other benefits:

“People on different benefits received inconsistent support – people with disability, additional requirements in household lost out”



Damian Barr
@Damian_Barr

We are not all in the same boat.
We are all in the same storm.
Some are on super-yachts. Some
have just the one oar.

Prevailing winds

Despite the diversity of contexts, circumstances and experiences, some consistent themes did emerge:

- **The importance of co-ordinated, government-led and supported response to a crisis**
 “Government should put emergency plans in place – learning lessons from the past year”
 “I think just by looking at what the community’s been doing is showing that there’s a gap. Like, these people have come along and said, ‘This is a gap and we’re filling it.’ So, by celebrating what the community’s doing, that’s showing the areas where there should be more support in a way... The fact we pull together has sort of paved what the policy should maybe look like in a way.”
 “It has proved that we’re able to pull together in a crisis. I do think the government have done what they can. Obviously, there’s been a lot of errors and things, but I just think if anything, this has just been such a good learning curve and the lessons that can be taken from it should really ensure that if it ever happens again, God forbid, that it’s just handled so much better.”
- **Shortage of trust in Government and politicians to want and/or be able to act**
 “Whose responsibility do you think it should be? Do you think it should be the communities or do you think government and local government should do more?”
 “I think it should be the government, but I know that it won’t be the government.”
- **Covid-19 has highlighted pre-existing inequalities and deprivation**
 “Government can no longer deny there is a problem. How can we ensure this doesn’t get forgotten?”
 “Look at the situation as a whole. There is not only an issue around food. I mean there is an issue around food, but there is an issue with the whole system. It is all about fairness and equality and everyone has a right to live – a certain standard of living.”
- **Value of what our Panel called “true social security” and the need to repair the current system**
 “It’s our inadequate benefit system that leaves people in great need.”
 “Even if you are not on the breadline, if people accepted help a little bit sooner, before it got really bad, they might not get to that point. Do you see what I mean? Like if you were struggling, then if you had a few meals extra, just to help you out in that week, that might be the difference between you falling behind on something and you just still staying afloat.”
- **Recognition of the necessity of having different routes to ensure food security in a crisis**
 Emergency food, vouchers, increased financial support are each recognised as potentially having value in meeting different sorts of crisis and needs – whilst also wanting to maintain awareness of the limitations of physical provision of food, in terms of practicality, dignity and choice.
- **Concerns regarding the adequacy of supplied food, in terms of quality, health, safety and appropriateness**

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How can we ensure this doesn’t get forgotten?

Key messages: what have we learnt?

Our Panellists' experiences make them well placed to assess the difference that policy interventions have made to them and their communities. Through sharing experiences and ideas, we have developed five over-arching lessons on how policy-makers, at all levels, could deliver better for those most at risk, in crises and at all times.

1. Hear directly from those who know

Our work has demonstrated that participation is not only possible but essential. Far too many voices are not heard, especially people for whom Covid-19 heightened isolation or marginalisation.

"Politicians should meet people, and really spend time getting a real insight into what's happening and enabling people to have a real voice."

Engaging with people with real lived experience can help decision-makers understand the challenges "from the inside-out" and find out what is really needed. This means enabling those who have experienced situations first-hand to contribute to assessments of how policy responses have, or have not, been effective, and to contribute to solutions:

"I would just like them to listen to real people, local people, that have got the knowledge. It's not about anyone being right, it's about listening to all the messages and them really sitting down and talking to us and saying what they can and can't do...."

We want to know what they can do realistically. Because you can only ask them to do what they can do realistically. You can't expect them to say, "We're going to eradicate it tomorrow and it will all be fine." But if they tell us what they can realistically do, then we know.

I mean, if they listen to us, would they be willing to help us? Would they be willing to meet us halfway? Because at the end of the day, they're running the country. And if we [community projects] weren't here, there would be a lot more people suffering, wouldn't there?"

Listen to real people,

local people that

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It's a fundamental human right

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to grow healthily

2. Food security is a fundamental human right

Our Panel felt strongly that nobody should have to fear that they will not be able to access food. They also wanted to stress that the right should be access to healthy, nutritious and fresh food, not just any food. It follows that our food and welfare systems must be designed from the non-negotiable starting point that it is essential that everyone's access to good food is safeguarded. Whilst the 'right to food' should apply to us all, our Panel felt that particular regard should be given to people who rely on support from others, particularly those who are in formal care settings, or whose circumstances place them at greater risk of being left behind in a crisis, such as children and people with additional needs.

"It's a fundamental human right to be able to have a balanced diet that allows people to grow healthily, children to grow into healthy teenagers to grow into healthy young adults, etc. Those building blocks are a fundamental human right, I think."

3. Rethink 'social security' so it truly offers sufficient support, for everyone, at all times

Ensuring benefits and work provide adequate, reliable income is the best way to protect and assist people. Some Panel members testified to the difference that being able to rely on the income supplement from Universal Credit or other benefits made to their families' wellbeing and peace of mind. They felt it was essential that this protection be preserved and extended to all. In particular, this means making the increase in Universal Credit rates permanent and ensuring people on other benefits do not miss out. It also means making sure everyone knows and receives the help they need.

There are so many loops

you've got to jump

through and so many

questions you've got

to answer

5. Individual households, communities, businesses and the state each have different strengths and roles

We need to strike an effective balance, allowing each to deliver what is needed and to function well. The Panel felt society should rightly celebrate the value of neighbourhood responses during the pandemic but also recognise the limits of community efforts, especially those which rely on volunteers.

"I think that [provision] needs to be brought down to a local government level. They need to be much more trusted. The local government of whatever type, whatever political persuasion, they need to be trusted with more of the actions. I actually think they will be in the end."

4. Crisis responses must be comprehensive, without compromising on dignity and choice

Experience over the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that we can, and must, trust people to know and do what is best for them and their families, rather than imposing inflexible top-down rules or solutions.

Whilst some extreme circumstances may call for practical provision of food, food parcels have inherent limitations, particularly regarding suitability of contents. Voucher systems or provision of cash through the benefit system have the potential to avoid these pitfalls, enhancing families' agency and ability to choose what they need.

"I think the government think that people who are in poverty live out of tinswithout a word of a lie, I have about 46 packets of pasta in my cupboard. Everybody has been getting pasta, pasta, pasta, pasta. Every group that gives out food is giving pasta."

"Give them vouchers, if you don't want to give people cash, give them vouchers. We were given by another charity, we were given £2,000 in £25 vouchers that we could give to people that we know in need. We didn't give them all out at once because we're going to use them over the year and like I said it's £25 on the card, they go into Morrison's and they get what they need. People can go and buy what they want, whether it's toiletries or food items."

Communication is key. To ensure everyone can receive the support they need, it is essential that there must be simple, clear information – accessible to everyone - on what help is available and how to access it.

Finally, decisions regarding how to provide food support in a crisis must be transparent, so we all know where money has been spent.

"The government should pull their finger out, is basically what was said, a bit more urgency and efficiency. People want to see a bit more transparency as well, where the money that was coming down from central government was actually going, what it was and wasn't paying for. In general, we wanted fewer hurdles and obstacles. But for individual people and for community projects as well, that often, if people need to access support, there are so many loops you've got to jump through and so many questions you've got to answer, and sometimes, answering the same questions again and again and again"

"I think councils should be more transparent in what they're doing. So maybe it's not government's responsibility once they've handed that money over and it's going locally. We all say we want local government, then it's local government should be more to account. I don't know. They cannot look after every penny as much as we'd like them to."

Methodology

Two years ago, conducting a project such as this without physical face-to-face gatherings would have felt unthinkable, but the spread of digital innovation in the pandemic, coupled with people's determination to find solutions, has made it effective. The digital landscape evolves rapidly, but we briefly outline our approach and highlight some benefits, drawbacks and lessons, in case it may help future projects.

What we did

This work was intentionally designed as longitudinal participative research, in collaboration between Church Action on Poverty and academic researchers. We sought to explore over time how a group reflected together on what was happening in their own lives and in their communities, as the pandemic developed. Participants had a mixture of distinct and similar experiences to draw on, and their insights and conversations shaped each other's thinking and conclusions.

This has been a specific form of public engagement research, which has included people most affected by the issues as equal participants, and which therefore reaches very considered conclusions.

- Panel members were **recruited by invitation**. All had either been involved in previous work with Church Action on Poverty, or were invited by people who had.
- **Panel meetings** were held monthly on Zoom, typically for two and a half hours, coordinated by a facilitator. Break-out rooms were used in larger meetings to enable more participation.
- In between, facilitators made monthly **one-to-one calls** to Panel members, to see how they were doing and to discuss the project, to help shape its progress.
- Each Panel member also had one **extended conversation** on Zoom with their team contact, discussing their experience around food security in more detail.
- **Project facilitation** debriefs were held on Zoom after most Panel meetings, and a WhatsApp group enabled quick and smooth decisions during meetings.

This has been a specific form of public engagement research, which has included people most affected by the issues as equal participants, and which therefore reaches very considered conclusions

Strengths of the approach

- Zoom removes geographic barriers. We had participants from Cornwall to Glasgow, so physical meetings would have meant much travel and expense. Zoom enabled good rapport despite distance.
- People could take part even if they had to be at home, such as caring for children or supporting family members.
- Zoom meetings can be structurally egalitarian. Nobody is at the "front", nor stuck in a corner. This fitted with the ethos of the project.
- Interactive tools such as Jamboards and screensharing allowed for effective instant collaboration between all Panel members.

Weaknesses of the approach

- Zoom can create screen fatigue, and it can be harder to sense when people are not fully engaged.
- Technology can be volatile. Connection problems have sometimes cut people off or created sound problems.
- There is less chance for impromptu chat and welfare checks. Unplanned but effective conversations, such as over coffee or walking to the bus stop, are not easily emulated on Zoom, where meetings can start and end abruptly.
- Zoom meetings are, structurally, very similar. Physical setting is important to memory, and it is hard to make the setting unique online, creating a risk that Zoom meetings are forgotten more easily.
- Hospitality is harder. e.g. unlike in physical meetings, hosts cannot easily provide drinks and food.

Lessons

- Keep sessions relatively short and focussed, and be wary of potential for people to feel disengaged.
- Use interactive options such as jamboards to ease engagement.
- Balance core business with informal elements. Zoom can give a window into people's lives. Meetings that reflect this informality, such as through chatty icebreakers, can be more comfortable.
- Provide additional communication channels, such as WhatsApp or social media groups for participants to use between meetings.



What happens next?

The next steps involve deliberative policy engagement. In autumn 2021, this project will move into its final phase, when we seek to bring Panel members into dialogue with those with experience of shaping policy.

Aim

Our planned Deliberative Policy Engagement workshops aim to create a space for constructive engagement and learning, by bringing together those with lived experience of challenges with a small group of stakeholders with policy/practice expertise.

A series of four online sessions in the autumn will provide an opportunity for the Panel and policy specialists to consider findings, share perspectives and reflect on the implications for future policy and practice 'post' Covid-19.

The work will include participatory methods to deepen understanding of actors and forces affecting food security, including identifying difficult policy choices and trade-offs and seeking to develop collective images of the future.

Objectives

- **Deliberate on lessons learned and possible next steps** – sharing of 'lived' and 'policy' experiences over this time, collectively discussing what has been learned and reflecting together on the implications of this.
- **Provide a learning opportunity for Panel Members** – about subject area, policy process and in terms of their experience/confidence speaking to policy-makers.
- **Engage in dialogue, in order to develop thinking to inform learning of the Panel and wider project** – sharing hopes for the future and situating these within fuller mutual appreciation of policy context and lived experience.
- **Create an opportunity for action-research regarding deliberative process** – identifying and disseminating learning from innovative deliberative/participative sessions between Panel and policy specialists.

Who will be involved?

Each Panel Member was invited to remain involved for Phase 2 – all those who were able to* agreed. We will invite policy specialists who have experience of working on policy issues regarding food security, including politicians, civil servants (policy and analysts) from a range of Government Departments; NGOs; campaign groups; and business leaders. Meetings will be held under the 'Chatham House' rule – we aim to produce a report on the proceedings, to be published in early 2022, sharing what was discussed but without attribution to any individual. This report will also include our reflection and learning from methods used.

* As is usual with this type of research, ill health, job-changes and other responsibilities have impacted on Panel members' availability – around one third of the original Panel have had to take a step back because of other pressures.

We aim to create a space for constructive engagement and learning, by bringing together those with lived experience of challenges with a small group of stakeholders with policy/practice expertise

Navigating Storms

“I’m hoping that enough voices are heard, and enough of us come together to be able to start making some actual change, where we’re not relying on the third sector, and we’re not relying on people sending somebody a box of food via the post, and somebody having to be grateful for some fruit that’s about to go off. I’m hopeful that we can do something about it. Because we can. We can do something about it. But we have to be heard, don’t we?”

Five overarching lessons from this project

- 1. Hear directly from those who know.**
- 2. Food security is a fundamental right.**
- 3. We need to redesign welfare so it offers sufficient support at all times.**
- 4. Crisis response must be comprehensive without compromising on dignity or choice.**
- 5. We must strike a balance between the roles of individual households, communities, and the state.**

