



# Food Experiences During COVID-19 Participatory Panel

## Participatory Methods in Practice: Key Learning

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Jane Perry, with Niall Cooper and Hannah Lambie Mumford

## About the research

### Food Vulnerability during COVID-19

The Participatory Panel discussed in this report was part of wider research mapping and monitoring responses to risks of food insecurity during the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK. The project was led by Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford (University of Sheffield) and Dr Rachel Loopstra (King's College London) in collaboration with Church Action on Poverty and Sustain. The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through the UKRI COVID-19 research and innovation fund. Further details and all project reports can be found on the project website - <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/>

Emerging findings from the Participatory Panel were brought together in a report – Navigating Storms: Learning from COVID-19 Food Experiences – <http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/navigatingstorms/>

### Introducing the research team

The 'Food Experiences during COVID-19 – Participatory Panel' included Cath Wallace, Cath Walsh, Dawn Hardman, Gemma Athanasius-Coleman, Jayne Gosnall, Mary Passeri, Monica Gregory, Penny Walters, Shaun Kelly, Suzy Alabere and Sydnie Corley, along with other members who preferred not to be named.

The Panel were supported by the project team – Ben Pearson, Gav Aitchison, Felicity Guite and Niall Cooper (Church Action on Poverty), Barbora Adlerova (Cardiff University), Jane Perry (independent social researcher), and Hannah Lambie-Mumford and Katy Gordon (University of Sheffield).

**Hannah Lambie-Mumford** (Department of Politics and International Relations and Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute, University of Sheffield) was the overall project lead for the Food Vulnerability During COVID-19 project which has two additional work strands looking at national and local policy and practitioner responses to food access issues during the pandemic.

[Church Action on Poverty](#) is a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. Church Action on Poverty work in partnership with churches, and with people in poverty themselves, to tackle the root causes of poverty. Its work is driven by their insights and experiences of people who live with poverty.

**Niall Cooper**, Director of Church Action on Poverty, has led on several flagship participatory policy programmes. Niall's role was to oversee the facilitation of the participatory policy panel work stream of the project. Church Action on Poverty were a named Co-investigator on the project and participated from the very start of the project, including the design of the project for the initial funding application.

**Jane Perry**, an independent lead researcher, brought extensive expertise of research directly involving those with lived experience of poverty, as well as of working at the academic-policy-NGO interface.

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# Food Experiences COVID-19 Participatory Panel

## *Participatory Methods in Practice: Key Learning*

### Executive Summary

The Food Experiences COVID-19 Participatory Panel created a unique opportunity for people with first-hand experience of struggling to afford food to be included directly in a wider Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded academic project mapping responses to food insecurity arising from COVID-19<sup>1</sup>.

Over 2020-21, up to fifteen Panel members from Cornwall, Newcastle, Oxford, York, Glasgow, Blackburn, Cardiff and Belfast came together every month to share their personal experience of difficulties in accessing food during the pandemic. The resulting participatory project built up a unique insight into what was important to each Panel member based on their own experience and extensive contact with their communities.

*Documenting an extraordinary moment in time; listening to and validating the experiences of people on the margins and developing a rigorous and replicable process that will inform future work*

This pioneering collaboration between the University of Sheffield and Church Action on Poverty resulted in a real-world example of co-creation, participation and execution, with the aim of enabling people with first-hand experience of food poverty to speak directly to, and with, academic, government and wider policy spheres.

*Mixing academic research with the approach of practitioners specialising in participation in this way was a bold and exciting idea, with success resting on the importance of good collaboration, as much as individual expertise in research or participatory methods.*

Such an inter-disciplinary collaboration involved working at an interface between what were, at times, very differing worldviews and cultures between researchers and the evidence they produce; the concerns of practitioners working in community development and anti-poverty activism; policymakers; and also those with lived experience of poverty, as individuals and community activists in their own right.

### Sharing our learning

Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic and as the cost-of-living crisis unfolds, the need for effective advocacy work on issues of food insecurity, poverty and destitution is increasingly urgent. As NGOs look for more inclusive ways of undertaking this work, participatory methods involving those with 'lived experiences' are increasingly being incorporated by organisations as part of the development of policy recommendations, campaigning and advocacy activities. However, these approaches can be challenging conceptually and methodologically.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

This paper presents a case-study documenting what we did as our project developed and sharing our main learning regarding the opportunities and challenges presented by this particular example of collaborative, participative research including:

***The benefits, but also the challenges of, collaboration and co-creation*** - including the importance of establishing project structure from the outset and of partners' mutual commitment to a specific and demanding form of knowledge generation.

***The conceptual conundrums presented by attempting to implement participatory approaches in practice*** - including understanding and negotiating the levels of participation that can realistically be achieved and navigating the ethical dilemmas this presents – and our learning regarding the value of establishing relational dialogue over time and meeting the challenge of staying 'agile' to respond to the emergence of a participatory project and developments in the wider world.

***Key aspects of our project execution, seeking to make participation possible and meaningful*** – establishing the project well, recruiting and sustaining engagement, planning and facilitating panel sessions and some of the challenges of analysis, report writing and 'impact'

*After 12 months of regular meeting, Panel members seemed to be growing in confidence and able to hold their ground in difficult, more formal, discussions, which may not have been the case a year earlier.*

## **Practical take-aways**

### ***Co-creation brings benefits but also challenges:***

- ❖ Design in collaboration and participation from the outset; avoid attempting to 'bolt-on' to preconceived project.
- ❖ Be aware that multi-disciplinary teams bring great strengths and opportunities, but also differing expectations and perspectives.
- ❖ Dedicated time from skilled research project manager can be essential in holding together different elements of a complex collaborative project.
- ❖ Build in even more time than you might think to establish/maintain relationships and ensure effective communication, including regular project team meetings and mutually agreed ways of systematically sharing/storing information.
- ❖ Put in place plans for monitoring and reflecting on progress, including how matters will be handled when (not if!) things do not always go smoothly/to plan.

### ***Participation is not for the faint-hearted or under-prepared***

- ❖ Be really honest about what level of participation your project (research questions, design and resources) really allows and what the practicalities of the work will dictate including in terms of analysis and writing up
- ❖ Think through early on what evidence you are producing, why and what you will be able to do with it – communicate clearly with all participants
- ❖ Investing time in building relationships, informal social spaces, sharing food together (even online) pays dividends

- ❖ Building/sustaining relationships over time is essential to enabling participants to gain trust in the process and the research team. Peer support and confidence to speak and 'own' the space also evolves and deepens over an extended period of time
- ❖ Try to have a defined purpose, structure and direction for sessions, whilst avoiding being prescriptive of specific topics/questions
- ❖ Provide ongoing learning/reflection spaces around ethics, pastoral care and mental health

### ***Care, time and capacity are crucial successful execution of a participatory project***

- ❖ It is difficult to under-estimate the time required for recruiting, supporting and sustaining a Participatory Panel, with even more required for additional aspects like engagement with policy specialists.
- ❖ Participation is never cost-free for participants – this needs to be considered in financial and non-financial recognition.
- ❖ For longitudinal projects, consider and plan for likely challenges to retention from the outset.
- ❖ Session planning and facilitation are key, particularly for online workshops.
- ❖ Overlook the basics of research execution (such as recording, transcription and data management) at your peril.
- ❖ Participation in analysis is likely to be an iterative process – this also takes time.
- ❖ Conceptual and methodological ideals will always hit the bumpy road of practicality.
- ❖ Whilst online spaces have limitations, with proper facilitation they can work surprisingly well at facilitating participation across wide geographic areas.

## **What we achieved**

In conclusion, we review what we achieved:

***Documenting an extraordinary moment in time*** – capturing the experience of COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of people living in food insecurity, capturing and documenting what the issues were and what people were feeling in the moment.

***Listening to and validating the experiences of people on the margins*** – by creating a space for people with first-hand experience to voice the key issues and do analysis of them, participants 'owned' the report and conclusions and gained confidence in their ability to effectively engage with policymakers.

***Development of a rigorous and replicable process that will inform future work*** – providing a proven model for participatory work and demonstrating the potential of online methods in bringing together a wide range of participants from across the country and with a range of personal challenges which might otherwise prevent them from being included.

We close with three reflections:

***What it means to undertake such participatory work in a time of crisis*** – the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic indelibly shaped our research. But it is quite possible that our hard-learned lessons about the importance and challenges of project 'agility' – developing along with wider unfolding socio-economic events; accepting uncertainty and difficulty planning; honing aims,

methodology and outcomes as we went along; building in patterns and practices of continually reflecting, learning and changing practice as a team – will become more, not less, relevant as the next few years unfold.

***The importance of understanding and valuing alternative forms of knowledge*** – most participatory projects will not meet the rigorous methodological standards (in terms of scale and execution) required by conventional ‘evidence-based-policy’. But that is not their intention. Instead, our Participatory Panel set out to give a platform to people with first-hand experience of food insecurity as purveyors of a distinct and complementary source of knowledge, generated in dialogue with others. That form of knowledge needs to be held in tandem with, and triangulated by, more conventional research findings. But accepting the nature of knowledge is not to downplay the process - to be worthwhile and to be ethical, participatory approaches they still need doing really well.

***Ambition tempered with realism*** – this project has demonstrated the potential for including those with lived experience of poverty and also the practical constraints which shape what can be achieved through this design/methodology. It remains very unlikely that participatory approaches will achieve social change, in and of themselves. Our hope is that, done well, they will be an important step on the way – strengthening voice and creating new relationships for social change in the longer term.

## **About the project**

*The Food Experiences COVID-19 Participatory Panel was part of wider research mapping and monitoring responses to risks of food insecurity during the COVID-19 outbreak in the UK. The project was led by Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford (University of Sheffield) and Dr Rachel Loopstra (King’s College London) in collaboration with Church Action on Poverty and Sustain. The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through the UKRI COVID-19 research and innovation fund.*

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# Food Experiences COVID-19 - Participatory Panel

## Food vulnerability during COVID-19

In early 2020, the crisis created by the COVID-19 virus raised new and increased risks of food insecurity due to people being unable to go out for food or incurring income losses relating to the pandemic. Governments, local authorities, charities and local communities were called on to work quickly to ensure access to food. New schemes - such as the government replacing incomes of people at risk of unemployment on account of lockdowns, providing food parcels for people asked to shield, referrals for people to receive voluntary help with grocery shopping, and free school meals replacement vouchers or cash transfers - worked alongside existing provision for those unable to afford food – such as food banks – which were themselves faced with the challenge of adapting their services to continue to meet increasing demand from a range of population groups.

The ESRC funded [Food vulnerability during COVID-19](#) project was designed to map this complex set of support structures and to monitor their development as the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impacts, evolved. A unique collaboration led by the University of Sheffield and King's College London alongside colleagues from [Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming](#) and [Church Action on Poverty](#), the project aimed to provide monitoring and analysis to inform food access policy and practice. Focused specifically on mapping food support systems, the project sat alongside other key projects such as the [COVID Realities](#) project, documenting life on a low income during the pandemic. The team also worked closely with stakeholders from national and local government, the civil service and voluntary sector.

## Academic-policy-practice engagement

The Food Experiences Panel was conceived in order to bring a participatory element into the wider Food Vulnerability project, operationalised through a collaboration between a multi-disciplinary, multi-sector (academic and NGO) research team. The project was co-designed and created through this collaboration, and subsequently in conjunction with the Panel members themselves, encouraging conversations across divides. This built on previous experience of partnering together on participatory and qualitative projects exploring food insecurity in the UK<sup>2</sup> and Church Action on Poverty's involvement with the [Poverty Truth Network](#). We were also aware of parallels with [Shaping our Lives](#) within health and social care, as well as with the [Hidden Dimensions of Poverty](#) research conducted by ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford using ATD's Merging Knowledge approach.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Perry and others, *Emergency Use Only: Understanding and Reducing the Use of Food Banks in the UK* (Oxfam, Church of England, Trussell Trust and Child Poverty Action Group, November 2014); Hannah Lambie-Mumford, *Step Up to the Plate* (Church Action on Poverty, 22 January 2018); Hannah Lambie-Mumford, *Hungry Britain: The Rise of Food Charity* (Policy Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> First developed in 1996-98 in France and Belgium, Merging Knowledge refers to a specific methodology aimed at overcoming the distinction between people in poverty who recount their lives and academics who analyse them, by developing a form of knowledge specifically linked to the life experiences of people in poverty, as considered carefully by them in dialogue with others. See Elena Lasida and Fran Bennett, 'The Merging of Knowledge: Empowering and Enabling', *Poverty*, 170 (2021), 4; Diana Skelton and Martin Kalisa, 'People in Extreme Poverty Act for Change', in *Forging Solidarity*, 2017, pp. 71-81.



In practice, this inter-disciplinary collaboration involved working at an interface between what were, at times, very differing worldviews and cultures between researchers and the evidence they produce; the concerns of practitioners working in community development and anti-poverty activism; policymakers; and also people with first-hand experience of poverty, as individuals and community activists in their own right.

## Participatory approaches and research

Participatory approaches seek to give more voice to people with direct experience of poverty, from defining issues to working out solutions. Often posed as an alternative to more traditional 'extractive' (or 'one-way') research, participatory approaches seek to be interactive, at best enabling participants to engage with all aspects of the research process and/or engage in two-way deliberation with researchers and policymakers. As such, participatory research into poverty - in which conventional research projects are designed and executed in a participatory manner e.g. COVID Realities - can be usefully distinguished from participatory approaches more generally (which seek to create opportunities for experts by experience to directly inform decision making and policy about areas they know about e.g. Poverty Truth Commissions).

Both wider participatory approaches and more specific participatory research are not a single methodology, but encompass a four-fold combination of:

- i. **Principles (the 'why' of participation)** – growing recognition of agency of people in poverty rather than just treating as passive victims; recognising expertise of people with experience of poverty in putting forward their own realities (and their right to do so); increasing effectiveness of research and/or policymaking deepening understanding of poverty and policy impact, including the principle, now widely accepted in International Development, that anti-poverty policies only work if they are based on the knowledge of people living in poverty
- ii. **Pragmatic compromise** – participation, as an approach to working in partnership with people with first-hand experience, is often portrayed as a spectrum or ladder. For example, JRF's Participation Spectrum, distinguishes four levels of partnership each varying in terms of the role of participants (from passive to active) and equivalent diminishing level of control held by the partner organisation<sup>4</sup>.
- iii. **Design features** – extensive development of participatory methods in International Development<sup>5</sup> and deliberative engagement in the UK<sup>6</sup>, including creating opportunities for two-way interactions between participants and researchers/policymakers or opportunities for participants to be involved in the analysis and/or dissemination of outputs
- iv. **Techniques** – specific practices (methods) by which participation is enabled, for example tools for use within participatory workshops or group discussions.

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Campbell, 'The Role of People with Experience of Poverty in Social Change?', Inside the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Institute of Development Studies, Participatory Methods <<https://www.participatorymethods.org>>. |

<sup>6</sup> 'Deliberative Engagement Best Practice Guide', Ipsos MORI.

The first of these – the reasons for using participatory approaches – are well established elsewhere in the literature<sup>7</sup>. This paper explores the latter three aspects, learning specifically from the experience of the Food Experiences COVID-19 Participatory Panel.

## **Execution in Practice**

As originally designed, the aim was to convene a national panel of people who had lived experience of receiving support to access food during the COVID-19 outbreak. The Panel formed one strand, alongside national level mapping and monitoring and eight in-depth local area case-studies, together providing collaborative, real time monitoring and analysis of food support systems to inform food access policy and practice as the UK emerges from the COVID-19 lockdown and going forward as the longer-term socio-economic impacts of the crisis become clearer.

Early discussions were crucial for clarifying the scope and purpose of the Panel strand. It was important to be clear that the Panel was not intended (nor able) to provide extensive, robust, qualitative research evidence of the full range of experiences of food insecurity during COVID-19<sup>8</sup>. Rather, the more modest – although still challenging – aim was to attempt to ensure that the voices of people with first-hand experience were heard within the wider project and in dialogue with policymakers. Throughout the project, this proved a difficult, but essential, tension to maintain.

Food Vulnerability During COVID-19 was not completely participatory research, in the truest sense<sup>9</sup>, because participants were not involved in the design and execution of the entire project. However, from the outset the Panel element aimed to be as fully participatory as possible. This was an extremely important feature of the design for Church Action on Poverty and the research team because doing so meant that the participants had agency, they owned the report, and the conclusions came from them. The process and the Navigating Storms report (published Oct 2021) validated their experiences and their opinions by creating a space for people with lived experience to voice the key issues and do analysis of them. This necessitated a shift in approach from the research team, towards facilitating a process and conversation, as one actor around the table, participating alongside Panel members rather than solely being ‘in charge’ and without having privileged access to development of analysis and recommendations.

The innovative research design was developed co-creatively but also in an agile manner, adapting flexibly and continually as the pandemic unfolded. Envisioned at the start as a combination of focus-group workshops and in-depth interviews, coupled with more creative narrative methods, the actual execution involved:

### ***Monthly panel meetings - Oct 2020 and Dec 2021***

- 15 Panel members – ordinary people with a range of direct experience of food insecurity in their own lives and in their communities - were recruited by invitation. All

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<sup>7</sup> Fran Bennett and Moraene Roberts, ‘Participatory Approaches to Research on Poverty’, JRF, 2004; Ruth Lister, Poverty, 2nd Edition, 2nd edition (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> That, different project, would have required a much larger scale with different design and implementation, which was not possible in time/resource available, particularly with challenges of the pandemic.

<sup>9</sup> See ‘Negotiating level of participation’ section, below

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 between Oct 2020 and July 2021, typically for two and a half hours, coordinated by a facilitator. Using a range of participatory and creative methods, the Panel shared and reflected on their experiences, discussed their responses to findings from the wider research and worked together to develop key messages for policymakers and beyond. Break-out rooms were used in larger meetings to enable more participation.
- In between Panel meetings, 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 two extended conversations on Zoom with their team contact, first discussing their experience around food security in more detail, then reviewing their involvement in the project.
- Project facilitation debriefs for the research team were held on Zoom after most Panel meetings, and a WhatsApp group enabled quick and smooth decisions during meetings
- Emerging findings were brought together in an interim report – [\*Navigating Storms: Learning from COVID-19 Food Experiences\*](#) – published as part of Challenge Poverty Week 2021.

#### ***‘Panel-Policy Deliberative Workshops’ – Autumn 2021***

Four final online deliberative sessions, participatory workshops providing an opportunity for the panel to come together with policy specialists to consider findings from the project so far, share their own perspectives and reflect on the implications for future policy and practice ‘post’ COVID-19. Panel participants spent time with people with power - a member of the House of Lords, senior people in NGOs, senior civil servants - people who panellists ordinarily would not meet. This further validated their experiences and signified that their experiences, opinions and analysis matter.

#### ***Ongoing reflection and learning***

Opportunities for reflection and learning were built in throughout the project, through enlisting Panel members in immediate feedback at the end of, and then in between, each session; through regular meetings of the entire research team; and through intentional follow-up conversations to capture more detailed reflections at the end of the initial workshop and policy sessions, together with a wider impact review across policy stakeholders and collaborating organisations.

This creation of intentional space to discuss issues arising from the wider project with everyone who has involved - generating insights into experience and policy recommendations, but also learning together from that experience – was essential to the development of the project and quality of outcomes.

This paper documents and shares some of that key learning.

## **Ethos - Collaboration and Co-creation**

As explained above, this project was a collaboration between academic and NGO partners, working together in order to undertake a participatory piece of research. Importantly, this collaboration was built into the structure of the project from the outset, providing the opportunity for an NGO with a strong history in participatory ethos and practice to participate in the design and execution of the Panel element of the Food Vulnerability during COVID-19 project.

Mixing academic research with the approach of practitioners specialising in participation in this way was a bold and exciting idea, with success resting on the importance of good collaboration, as much as individual expertise in research or participatory methods. Key learning from this included:

### **Benefits of collaboration**

From an academic perspective, this collaboration was invaluable because of Church Action on Poverty's experience of these approaches in practice (if not as academic research), their embedded networks and community relationships (which were essential to recruitment) and understanding of what this kind of approach can achieve (in terms of the policy conversations and makers we were able to engage with). In turn, working with an academic partner enabled Church Action on Poverty to document lived experiences in a way that they otherwise would not have been able to.

### **Importance of project structure**

The specific nature, skills and experience of team members (see front) were an essential feature in ensuring the success of the project. This coming together of a multi-specialist, cross-disciplinary team was intentionally designed as a collaborative partnership. Each party was established from the outset as formal (equal) partners with resources, rather than a sub-contractor or less formal partnership arrangement. This enabled Church Action on Poverty to structure a team of five people working alongside the University of Sheffield to deliver the project from start to finish. Formal co-investigator arrangements also embedded flexibility within the project, with partners enabled to work together to adapt the design to respond to external challenges and emerging findings.

### **Mutual commitment to a specific form of knowledge generation**

Mutual commitment to attempting to join up the distinct kinds of evidence generated from the other project work streams with knowledge generated from lived experience underpinned this part of the project, providing the impetus for partner organisations to get involved. This relied on good relationships, established through previous work in the field over several years.

Similarly, we agreed that to be most effective, participatory elements of the project had to be 'written in' from the beginning. It is extremely hard to retrospectively introduce participatory elements to a project designed from an alternative perspective.

### **Successful collaboration requires investment**

Developing and maintaining shared expectations, especially across quite different perspectives and institutional contexts, was vitally important but challenging. Differing expectations ranged

from explicit/formal requirements (e.g. the complexities of navigating academic constraints around research ethics procedures, in contrast to a less structured, more relational, practitioner approach) to implicit working practices (e.g. use of email, WhatsApp etc.). Working across different organisational and personal cultures required additional time to be set-aside to share and learn to work with each other.

Co-ordinating project management across several organisations also required time and resource, as well as patience, particularly where staff capacity was not solely under project control. Whilst remote working provided definite advantages (reduced travel time, ease of communication) it required discipline/organisation in terms of working practices (sharing/awareness of working days, other commitments etc). In practice, it proved useful to have dedicated lead research management from outside of the core organisations, able to co-ordinate and assist with communication across and between partners, ensuring clarity and navigating differences.

#### **PRACTICAL TAKE-AWAYS - Co-creation brings benefits but also challenges:**

- ❖ Design in collaboration and participation from the outset; avoid attempting to 'bolt-on' to preconceived project.
- ❖ Be aware that multi-disciplinary teams bring great strengths and opportunities, but also differing expectations and perspectives.
- ❖ Dedicated time from skilled research project manager can be essential in holding together different elements of a complex collaborative project.
- ❖ Build in even more time than you might think to establish/maintain relationships and ensure effective communication, including regular project team meetings and mutually agreed ways of systematically sharing/storing information.
- ❖ Put in place plans for monitoring and reflecting on progress, including how matters will be handled when (not if!) things do not always go smoothly/to plan.

## Approach - Participation

Participation of people with first-hand experience of poverty in research and decision-making about the policies which matter to them is rapidly becoming established as essential in promoting dignity and agency, helping to redress power imbalances and ensuring policies are informed by those who know best. Participation is key but also complex. This section considers some of the challenges we encountered in attempting to achieve meaningful participation, including establishing the level of participation which is realistically possible, particularly within wider project and logistical constraints and some of the ethical challenges this presented. We share our learning about the value of longitudinal projects in sustaining dialogue over time, as well as the challenge of staying 'agile' in the face of rapidly developing wider situations.

### Negotiating level of participation

Participation (and exclusion) are best conceived as a range or continuum rather than binary categories. People with first-hand experience of poverty are too often simply shut out. But it is more helpful to think of the process of inclusion as a spectrum, rather than in black and white terms.

Given this, any and all projects involve negotiations and compromises regarding the level and kind of participation achieved, and by whom. This is particularly true of large, externally conceived, initiated and (crucially) funded projects, especially those which attempt to combine a range of actors with differing expertise, education and access to power. The level of participation a project achieves, across its process, depends on the original research aims, design and resources available. Eventually, ideals will come face-to-face with practicalities, and compromises will need to be negotiated.

For our Food Experiences Panel, one example of where negotiations regarding level of participation (of those with lived experience of poverty) were crystallised was in tensions around the focus and scope of our research questions. Because the Panel was one element of a wider project, although Church Action on Poverty contributed to the development of high-level research questions (itself one form of participation), these were set before the individual Panel members were included. The focus of the Panel was, to a certain extent, dictated by inviting Panel members to hear and reflect on findings from the wider project, topics which were predetermined. Those discussions contributed to the shape of the wider project and findings but did not, entirely, set the agenda.

Later in the project, there were more open opportunities for Panel members to share their own concerns and to decide together where to focus their efforts. However, inevitably, this still involved negotiating compromise, balancing the dichotomy between valuing everyone's ideas and interests with the difficulty of narrowing down a topic sufficiently for meaningful discussion. In designing and facilitating these sessions we learnt that it was helpful to be clear, that is having defined purpose, structure and direction for sessions, whilst avoiding being prescriptive of topics/questions. An alternative approach also included starting by agreeing together an agenda (of questions which all – Panel members and research team - thought were of interest) but to be willing to be led by the direction which participants wished to take it. This, in itself, recognised that the development of ongoing conversation is fundamental to a discursive methodology, rather than a tangent or deviation. One contribution of the research team was then to relate Panel concerns back to the academic research questions, attempting to bridge the gap and make connections in Panel discussions, write up of findings and dissemination.

## Navigating ethical dilemmas

The 'messiness' of participation (tensions, ambiguities and compromises) raise ethical dilemmas and challenges. For us, these included:

- Balancing the importance of fully appreciating and validating 'lived experience,' whilst also recognising nature and boundaries of any one particular perspective – holding the tension between the 'particular' and the 'general' without further stigmatising or talking down to participants.
- Recognising the significance of language, particularly when it comes to talking about poverty and vulnerability, where some people find particular terms insensitive or stigmatising. Similarly others resent use of 'expert jargon' which they perceive as deliberate obfuscating, designed to exclude the less educated from discussion. Whilst one effective solution is to encourage participants to use their own language, we quickly discovered that, of course, not all our participants shared the same language or opinions about it. Furthermore, some Panel members felt strongly that communication of findings intended to influence policymakers should use 'their' (i.e. the policymakers') language in order to communicate effectively/be taken seriously. Their invitation to the members of the team with research or academic expertise to assist in this 'translation' felt like a powerful, if not unambiguous, moment in the project.
- Acknowledging the emotional toll not only of discussing difficult, traumatic and deeply personal experiences, but also of holding the same conversations over many years, with a feeling that little if anything is changing for the better. Several participants, including some who later dropped out of the process, questioned "what difference talking can really make" and expressed deep discomfort at simply being asked to repeat things that they had said before with little, if any, guarantee that it would make any impact this time. This was a deeply discomfiting aspect of the project. We felt a responsibility to be appropriately cautious about what the project could achieve, whilst also acknowledging the contribution of, and toll on, participants. It was important to remember to leave space to acknowledge and accommodate emotional effort involved in participation, offering appropriate support during and after sessions.

## Value of establishing relational dialogue over time

We discovered that one valuable response to both of the challenges above was found in the benefits of establishing and maintaining relationship and dialogue over an extended period of time (over 18 months). After 12 months of regular meeting, Panel members seemed to be growing in confidence and able to hold their ground in difficult, more formal, discussions, which may not have been the case a year earlier. Meeting repeatedly, together with creating opportunities for participants to get to know each other outside of formal meetings (through online social sessions and a WhatsApp group) also made a large contribution to creating space that panel members felt comfortable in and felt ownership of, contributing to breadth and depth of discussions and our mutual ability to 'hold' difficult issues.

However, this presented particular challenges when we sought to include policymakers into that space. Whilst we tried to be clear about the intentionality and benefit of seemingly 'social-spaces' (e.g. sharing lunch before main meeting) in building relationships and establishing group dynamics, it proved difficult to get people with demanding work schedules to be able to make time to engage. Some policy specialists were also reluctant, or unable to participate on a



personal level (not just as a professional persona).

### **Challenge of staying 'agile'**

Participatory research is, by its nature, emergent. Projects need to be 'agile' in order to be able to respond to developing concerns of participants but also changes in the context and wider environment. This is always the case but, as with so many things, these challenges were highlighted and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent socio-economic turmoil. The constantly developing picture of the pandemic made it difficult to plan; research aims, questions and methods had to be honed as we went along.

Working with uncertainty and emergence requires flexibility. It is also helpful to have an element of iteration built into the design, if possible, conceiving participatory projects more as a continuous circle of participatory reflection, action, reflection etc. rather than single task-finish events.

The 'agility' of our project relied on the strengths of our collaboration, as set out above. This brought benefits, as we were able to adapt methodology as we went, reflecting on our learning and changing practice, as a team, on the go. However it sometimes meant that the project felt quite unclear and hard to envisage, particularly at first. This in turn created challenges for recruiting and communicating with participants (see below). Success relied on good individual skills and partnership/team working, and also an element of realism: although the project was not always everything that was envisaged, we achieved a lot in tough circumstances.

#### **PRACTICAL TAKE-AWAYS: Participation is not for the faint-hearted or under-prepared**

- ❖ Be really honest about what level of participation your project (research questions, design and resources) really allows and what the practicalities of the work will dictate including in terms of analysis and writing up
- ❖ Think through early on what evidence you are producing, why and what you will be able to do with it – communicate clearly with all participants
- ❖ Investing time in building relationships, informal social spaces, sharing food together (even online) pays dividends
- ❖ Building/sustaining relationships over time is essential to enabling participants to gain trust in the process and the research team. Peer support and confidence to speak and 'own' the space also evolves and deepens over an extended period of time
- ❖ Try to have a defined purpose, structure and direction for sessions, whilst avoiding being prescriptive of specific topics/questions
- ❖ Provide ongoing learning/reflection spaces around ethics, pastoral care and mental health



## Execution - Methods

In terms of the execution of the project, the collaborative partnership brought together academic rigour, research project-management expertise and extensive experience in facilitation of participative spaces, especially for those who might be considered “on the margins”. The methods we developed, tried, tested and adapted demonstrated that coherent and systematic research can be done in a participatory way but that addressing unequal power dynamics takes constant care and attention. On the way, our experience provided lots of learning regarding effective and best practice in this area.

### Establishing the project

Just as project structure and mutual expectations were important on an organisational level, clarity around what the project was aiming to achieve and how was essential for the participants. Setting and managing expectations felt particularly challenging when this was the first time any of us, including many of the research team, had been part of this sort of project.

Our most significant learning regarded the importance of communicating clearly, particularly in terms the participants were familiar with and could understand. To give one example, even documents which experienced researchers had carefully crafted and perceived to be ‘accessible’ were revealed to not necessarily to be so for participants. Talking participants through the project aims, objectives and process verbally, and repeatedly, proved to be essential. This requires making sure there is sufficient infrastructure around the process, including 1-1 support, debriefs and spaces for participants to connect as a group between meetings, to ensure communication and comprehension is ongoing, not just a one-off event.

### Recruiting and sustaining engagement

Who participates? and on what terms? are central methodological challenges for participatory projects and not ones which are easy to resolve. Issues surrounding recruitment include the selection of participants and ‘experts’ – who is given the opportunity to take part – but also whether they are able to access that opportunity. Questions of access, time and resources all influence who hears about the project; how open they are to taking part; and, even when they are willing, whether they are able to take part. These more practical issues overlay deeper systemic problems with the label of ‘poverty’ itself, plus differences of power within/between marginalised communities.<sup>10</sup>

Recruiting and sustaining an appropriate number and diversity of attendees was a considerable challenge for our project. Conceptual high standards from a methodological research perspective, for example around ‘sampling’ and representation, quickly ran into the hard reality of the difficulty of contacting and engaging participation (especially during a pandemic where the possibility of face-to-face recruitment meetings was not an option), even for an organisation like Church Action on Poverty who are experienced in this area and with pre-established networks and goodwill with individuals and community groups. We aimed for invitees to our Panel to be as diverse as possible, identifying a number of different demographic characteristics and experiences of food insecurity which we felt it was important to include. Whilst we

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<sup>10</sup> Bennett and Roberts, p. 3.

monitored this, it was ultimately simply not feasible to attempt any form of 'representation' in the Panel. These are challenges which deserve more time and attention in the field.

Once recruited, our Panel also experienced quite high drop off rate. Some withdrawing participants expressed that they simply no longer wanted to take part, but for most withdrawal was reluctant, caused by life circumstance – often severe illness or pressures on time, particularly as participants returned to work. Although this was, perhaps, to be expected, this loss was often disappointing and disruptive to the operation of the remaining panel. Three key learning points included:

- Recruitment and retention are factors which ideally need to be built into the design phase – either starting with sufficient participants to accommodate attrition and/or including plans to refresh Panel membership at strategic points.
- Members of the Panel varied themselves in the type of involvement and commitment they were looking for.
- Participation should not be seen as 'cost-free,' in terms of time or money – like us all, people living with poverty may have particular pressures in terms of illness, caring responsibilities (for adults as well as children), work and voluntary commitments. We were able to offer financial recognition, in the form of vouchers. It was also important to make sure we valued participants time by not wasting it.

In terms of sustaining participation, we learnt the value not only of regular reminders, but also personal checking in (by 1-2-1 contacts) between sessions. Other questions raised included: How to keep momentum in-between workshops? How to help people come back after a missed session or two, so they don't become too detached? And whether it might be possible to build in opportunities for participants to contribute to the work of the Panel in between, even if they were not able to make a session?

## **Planning and facilitating panel meetings**

Our project revolved around monthly panel meetings with scheduled 1-2-1 chats between participants and Church Action on Poverty staff in-between meetings. We also explored other creative forms of participation like diaries or videos. These were embraced enthusiastically by a few of the Panel members but ultimately proved hard to sustain.

Designing and facilitating Panel sessions was a challenge, particularly as online meeting was new to everyone involved. Meeting online (via Zoom) worked better than anticipated and offered enormous potential in making possible increased accessibility and sustained connection that would not otherwise have been feasible, not only because of geographical distance, but also time, health conditions etc. It also acted as a leveller for participants (as long as they were comfortable with Zoom) helping to provide an equal platform where, with time/support, all Panel members felt able to take part and be heard.

Participatory methods used included regular icebreakers at the start of each session, discussion in small, facilitated breakout groups as well as plenary sessions, the use of collaborative online tools (Google Jamboard) enabling participants to collectively comment on, critique and refine draft findings.

However Zoom carried limitations too. What 'works' is often context specific, depending very much on the individuals and group dynamics involved. Learning to do it well for that group of people was often a process of trial and error, particularly in the initial stages. Sufficiently

engaging participants, especially in virtual discussion proved, for us, to require a balance of small group and plenary sessions, as well as a mix of facilitation styles and exercises

## **Analysis, report writing and ‘impact’**

The final stages of the project process felt an exceptionally long way off at the planning stage and, as we have seen, in an emergent participatory project in particular, a lot may change in the meantime. However, how analysis, writing and dissemination will be done (and by whom) are crucial issues in a participatory project.

In our project, iteration was key to introducing an element of participation into the analysis and writing process. Initial ‘analysis’ was, of course, done by participants in Panel discussions, enhanced by building in reflective elements for both Panel and research team (at the end of sessions and separately). However, an element of more traditional qualitative analysis was maintained through review, indexing and coding of transcripts. This provided a crucial opportunity to review themes across different discussions and 1-2-1 conversations. But because of practicalities, the bulk of this work was limited to one research specialist. To counter this we built in a process of ‘report-back’ whereby the developing findings were repeated back to participants in subsequent sessions, inviting comment and further discussion. This was, in turn, fed back into the emerging key themes and eventual report. Whilst a limited and imperfect attempt at “co-ownership” of findings, this was felt to be the best we could manage in the circumstances and was welcomed by Church Action on Poverty and some participants as an alternative to their experience of other projects, in which analysis and reporting had remained very much the preserve of research ‘experts.’

Reception of the resulting ‘Navigating Storms’ report was mixed: It was felt by some to be an “impressive attempt at participatory analysis and writing, enhancing ownership by the Panel.” Feedback from the Panel suggested most felt the report was thorough and that their views were fairly represented. However, others felt the report was a “bit wishy-washy”. It remains unclear how much this was the result of the participatory process per se, or the specific challenge of trying to cover so much material in one report (itself a product of the wide range of interests the participants brought to the Panel). However, some participants did strongly express that they felt analysis and reporting were “best left to ‘experts’”.

Expectations of ‘impact’ were difficult to manage. Some of the research team expressed the view that it “would have been nice to have more tangible outcome,” perhaps with a bigger launch and more policy interest. But in fact the actual learning was about the need for greater clarity as to what ‘impact’ on policy could be achieved in limited time available. Bennett and Roberts acknowledge that people living in poverty may have high expectations of researchers’ power or low expectations of change<sup>11</sup> – we experienced both, creating a difficult tightrope to walk.

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<sup>11</sup> Bennett and Roberts.

**PRACTICAL TAKE-AWAYS: Care, time and capacity are crucial for the successful execution of a participatory project.**

- ❖ It is difficult to under-estimate the time required for recruiting, supporting and sustaining a Participatory Panel, with even more required for additional aspects like engagement with policy specialists.
- ❖ Participation is never cost-free for participants – this needs to be considered in financial and non-financial recognition.
- ❖ For longitudinal projects, consider and plan for likely challenges to retention from the outset.
- ❖ Session planning and facilitation are key, particularly for online workshops.
- ❖ Overlook the basics of research execution (such as recording, transcription and data management) at your peril.
- ❖ Participation in analysis is likely to be an iterative process – this also takes time.
- ❖ Conceptual and methodological ideals will always hit the bumpy road of practicality.
- ❖ Whilst online spaces have limitations, with proper facilitation they can work surprisingly well at facilitating participation across wide geographic areas.

## Conclusions

Participative approaches can be defined in practice as the “attempt to combine different forms of knowledge in a way which tries to create a more equal and two-way dynamic between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’”<sup>12</sup>. However, participation that truly allows all voices to be heard in an unfiltered way, is – quite obviously - not actually possible. Instead any organisations or projects seeking to incorporate participatory processes into research and policymaking need to navigate their own paths through a more complicated process of trade-offs and compromises between ideals and reality, theory and practice. In this more nuanced application, participatory projects are those which seek to discern meaningful insight and recommendations through processes which do their best to ensure that those who have most at stake (in this case the economically precarious or marginalised) in the issues are, as far as possible, enabled to have a genuine stake in the research and findings.

As we have sought to demonstrate, what might be seen as the ideal of participatory process – complete control given to participants – is too often not practical, nor is it straightforward. Merging Knowledge approaches emphasise that first-hand experience is one of a number of forms of knowledge – with the strength coming from that very bringing together of different forms of knowledge and expertise<sup>13</sup>. Many of us remain convinced that it is essential that space is made at the research and policy table for the form of knowledge that comes from lived experience. But exactly how that takes place will be a trade-off between needs of project, organisations and individuals. Limits of time and money inevitably influence research design.

This paper has sought to describe the process of one project, taking place at a very particular point in time, but also to discern some of our wider learning regarding the ethos, approach and execution of participatory projects. The key conclusion for us is of the importance of sustained dialogue and debate in helping to increase potential for true participation. The hope remains that such - carefully designed and managed (and therefore well resourced) - participative dialogue might open up more nuanced opportunities for policy influence; although we remain sanguine that, in reality the processes by which policy is shaped are complex and that often those involved might never know or be able to demonstrate retrospectively the influence they had.

## What we achieved

### *Documenting an extraordinary moment in time*

Church Action on Poverty wanted to capture the moment from the perspective of people living in food insecurity, capturing and documenting what the issues were and what people were feeling in the moment. Through the monthly panel discussions and the Navigating Storms report the project undoubtedly did this. Two years on from the original project planning, the value of this is perhaps even greater than anticipated: the extraordinary and rapidly changing situation that the pandemic presented makes it hard to think back and remember what it was like. Without the

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<sup>12</sup> Bennett and Roberts, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Lasida and Bennett; Skelton and Kalisa.

records captured by the project, it could be easy to forget the experiences that households and communities were faced with.

### ***Listening to and validating the experiences on people on the margins***

Furthermore, the project captured the 'live' views, thoughts and experiences of people living on the margins, experiencing the brunt of the pandemic - these are extremely important voices that need to be heard but are often voices that are not regarded as significant. This project made the resources available to capture the voices in a more thorough, systematic and rigorous way, rather than what might have been more of 'having a chat.' This arguably strengthens the weight which external parties give to the findings.

In addition, the agency and ownership held by participants throughout the process validated their experiences and opinions. By creating a space for people with first-hand experience to voice the key issues and do analysis of them, participants 'owned' the report and conclusions. This in turn contributed to their confidence and effective engagement with the policy workshops. Many of the panel members are going on to be involved in further new work with Church Action on Poverty providing the opportunity to take forward some of the findings from the food access project for further exploration.

Significantly, in line with wider Merging Knowledge approaches<sup>14</sup>, this demonstrates that the role of participants with first-hand experience of poverty is not confined to just describing their own lives. Instead it proves they are able to examine their experiences and experiences of others and to join dialogue with academics and 'policy-specialists' in identifying and shaping recommendations. Taking on this role of 'thought-leader' is not without risk and requires proper preparation and support, but it is possible.

### ***A rigorous and replicable process that will inform future work***

A main driver for many organisations to get involved in participatory work is to provide a platform from which voices of those with lived experience can be heard in ways which will be taken seriously, particularly by those with influence on policy. The systematic, rigorous approach taken by the Food Experiences project has proved an effective way of working, providing Church Action on Poverty with valuable knowledge and first-hand experience and helping to develop a model for future work.

The Food Experiences COVID-19 Panel was also the first time that Church Action on Poverty have done work with people with experience of poverty using online methods. Previously it had been thought that such work would need to be done in person, and although there is much to be said for in person work, our project has demonstrated the potential of online methods as well as providing key learning about how to maximise their success.

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<sup>14</sup> Skelton and Kalisa, p. 71.

## Closing reflections

### *Reflection 1: Research in a time of 'perma-crisis'*

Our original instinct was to begin this section by reflecting on how the very particular time of crisis prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic shaped our research and experience. We have described how compound uncertainties and constraints influenced what we did and how, for better as well as worse. But going further shared journeys, as our personal and professional lives were impacted by the unfolding pandemic and lockdowns, strengthened relationships between the Panel and enhanced quality of discussion; shared grief, somewhat unexpectedly, dominated the first shared session between the Panel and policy makers. More prosaically, members of both the Panel and research team experienced challenges to physical and mental health and admitted to often finding it difficult to keep heads above water and the project, never mind engage in wider reflection/learning

However, Julia Unwin's reflections that we may well be moving into a time of 'perma-crisis'<sup>15</sup>, reframe these reflections, suggesting that those experiences of conducting research during a pandemic do not, sadly, only relate to that one specific moment in time but to the most recent period of unfolding crisis. It is quite possible that our hard-learned lessons about the importance and challenges of project 'agility' – developing along with wider unfolding socio-economic events; accepting uncertainty and difficulty planning; honing aims, methodology and outcomes as we went along; building in patterns and practices of continually reflecting, learning and changing practice as a team – will become more, not less, relevant as the next few years unfold.

### *Reflection 2: Alternative forms of knowledge*

Participatory projects, often by necessity and design very small-scale, specific and purposive rather than representative in their selection of participants, are often subject to challenge regarding the nature of the evidence they create - the meaning and value of findings. The Merging Knowledge approach<sup>16</sup> points to a helpful way forward here. For conventional social research projects (qualitative and quantitative), particularly those seeking to influence 'evidence-based policy,' the 'quality' of evidence produced rests on accepted standards of methodological rigour. That is one, valuable, form of knowledge – which, indeed, could be generated using a participatory approach. But that was not what our strand of the Food Vulnerabilities project set out to achieve. Instead, our Participatory Panel set out to give a platform to those with experience of food insecurity as purveyors of a distinct and complementary source of knowledge. Our participants were not the subjects of research, they were people who had opinions based on their own experience; not case-studies or research objects but participants in a conversation about policy.

This conceptual fine distinction presents considerable challenges – not least to the ongoing question of how to report and disseminate "findings" and what weight insights generated by these processes should be given. It also points to the importance of triangulation, by which insights from participatory dialogues can be related to data obtained from other methods and/or

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<sup>15</sup> Julia Unwin, 'The Role of Place in Recovering from the Crisis: What Have Universities Got to Do It with It?', 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CuhbzCKe2o>>.

<sup>16</sup> Lasida and Bennett; Skelton and Kalisa.- see footnote on p6 above

methods combined, using each in turn to inform the other. An alternative is to consider positioning of such projects in the research-policy process, informing design and/or creating opportunities for further reflection on triangulated findings, rather than being solely relied upon to produce “hard” evidence, which may require particular methodologies.

But we wish to stress an important caveat here: Whilst participatory Merging Knowledge-type approaches might not be intending to meet the exacting standards of ‘evidence-based policy,’ they still need doing really well – to be worthwhile and to be ethical. The learning shared here is intended to contribute to development of robust, careful, technical and ethical research process, of the high standard which is required to do justice to participants and the significance of their stories and lives.

### ***Reflection 3: Ambition tempered with realism***

Our closing reflection is of the privilege of having experienced first-hand the power of sustained personal engagement and dialogue between policymakers and people with experience of poverty, together with a determination that such spaces need to be increased, in academic research and civil society. However we also wish to sound a note of caution about the need to be realistic about the challenges of doing such work well, the costs involved and the limitations.

Those inspired by, or excited about, engaging in participatory processes need to take great care with the responsibilities which come from initiating such projects, particularly in terms of the vulnerabilities, expectations, hopes and fears of those they seek to involve. Researchers and practitioners each need to consider the nuance of what they are and aren’t doing, at every stage of design, execution, sense-making and dissemination of participatory processes. This includes ensuring everyone is conceptually informed about the nature of evidence they are creating and are supported to understand the policy process and their potential role within it.

In this, a merging of knowledge and expertise from research and practice is itself essential in bringing a much-needed note of realism. It is important to avoid over- or under-selling participatory approaches. It remains very unlikely that participatory approaches will achieve social change, in and of themselves. Our hope is that, done well, they will be an important step on the way – strengthening voice and creating new relationships for social change in the longer term.



## Annex - Feedback from Deliberative Sessions with Policy Specialists

A clear message from our work has been the importance of 'listening to those who know.' Participants themselves have identified that an important mark of success of our project would be if, in the future, more policy responses were designed with direct and meaningful input from people with first-hand experience:

*"The combination of the academic and the grass roots was really, really effective. I already believed in the value of the grass roots, of course, because of the Poverty Truth Commissions and things like that. But actually watching how the research worked and seeing the researchers acknowledge how positive they had found it was great. And really encouraging that there might be more of this to come"* (Panel member)

*"The methodology is something that we are interested in going forward"* (policy specialist)

Several participants – panel and 'policy' - commented on the value of the breadth of people in the room, providing "insight and a variety of perspectives" whilst maintaining a sense of 'safe space' for engaging in dialogue:

*"[Attendance gave me] a broader range of lived experience, including a widening of views from those experiencing food vulnerability for financial reasons. Taking time to listen can shape policy. It also helps considerations on what more can be done to amplify the voice or voices of those that are heard less, either down to lack of formal position, confidence or expectations."* (Policy specialist)

*"I never felt that what I said was unimportant. I never once felt that"* (Panel member)

The workshops also succeeded in providing a learning opportunity for everyone involved, particularly regarding the multiple causes of food vulnerability and complexity involved in responding appropriately, situating hopes for the future within fuller mutual appreciation of policy context and lived experience:

*"...certainly, an enhanced awareness of responses across UK, systemic failures and potential to inspire a more thought through way of responding to crisis."* (Policy specialist)

They also created an opportunity for action-research regarding deliberative process – identifying and disseminating learning and taking this forward into future projects. Several policy attendees signalled their interest in taking forward partnerships or specific work ideas, as well as indicating how they felt the learning would impact their future work, including "informing engagement with key stakeholders" and "shaping of the enabling services and partnerships, as well as shape work around social mobility."

*"I would do it again. It is an agreed way of journeying together which, done with collective understanding and consent, is done with greater dignity. It removes observer and subject, instead creating a single role, that of participant."* (Policy specialist)



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