



FOOD VULNERABILITY
DURING **COVID-19**



Food Experiences During COVID-19 Participatory Panel Deliberative Policy Engagement Autumn 2021

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Deliberative Policy Engagement – Autumn 2021

What we did

The Food Experiences COVID-19 Participatory Panel was made up of ordinary people from across the UK with direct experience of receiving support to access food over the pandemic (between October 2020 and December 2021). During the autumn of 2021, our Deliberative Policy Engagement workshops brought Panel members together with 'policy specialists' with direct experience of shaping policy regarding food security. Our aim was to create a space for constructive dialogue, engagement and learning regarding food security during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

A series of 4 online sessions provided an opportunity for the panel and 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.

Each workshop included: 4-8 Panel members from across the UK; 8-12 'policy specialists' drawn from a range of policy/practice expertise, including civil servants from a range of UK and devolved government departments, charities, campaign groups and business leaders; 4-5 members of the project team, there to facilitate and support the sessions.

Everyone was welcome to share the insights and learning they had gained from being part of the panel, as long as they did not identify any individual or organisation taking part.

To find out more

The Panel's work complements wider work of the **Food Vulnerability during COVID-19** project. Find out more at <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19>.

¹ Food Exp CV19 Panel, 2021: Navigating Storms: Learning from Covid-19 food experiences - Aitchison, G. and Perry, J. (eds.) Church Action on Poverty. Available from www.church-poverty.org.uk/navigatingstorms

About the Panel

The Food Experiences during COVID-19 Participatory Panel was convened as part of the wider Food Vulnerability During COVID-19 project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

The Panel brought together a group of grassroots participants - 15 ordinary people with a range of direct experience of food insecurity in their own lives and in their communities - in order to hear directly from those who have lived experience of receiving support to access food during COVID-19 crisis.

The process has been facilitated by a collaborative team from Church Action on Poverty led by CAP's Director, Niall Cooper and the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute (SPERI) at the University of Sheffield, led by Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford. The team were supported by Jane Perry, independent participatory research specialist.

The Panel met regularly between October 2020 and December 2021. Using a range of participatory and creative methods, they 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.

Emerging findings were brought together in an interim report – Navigating Storms: Learning from COVID-19 Food Experiences¹ – published as part of Challenge Poverty Week 2021.

What we talked about

We started in **Workshop 1 - Our COVID-19 Experiences** – with sharing experiences and perspectives from the pandemic, including personal stories of how access to food, policy work and community engagement were affected during the initial lockdown of Spring 2020. We discussed how our relationship with food has changed or stayed the same, some of us cooking and growing more, some of us struggling with lack of food in shops and unable to get online delivery. We also noted how this phase was difficult for all of us in our respective work and community environments.

In **Workshop 2 - What have we learned?** - we explored the Navigating Storms report analysing policy responses designed to ensure food security during the pandemic. We discussed how these responses worked in practice and what roles different actors should play in these interventions in the future. In doing so we identified a range of benefits but also challenges regarding emergency food support. These included limitations associated with delivery of physical food parcels, set against the potential benefits, but also administrative complexity, of 'cash-first' approaches. We also noted a particular difficulty in balancing appropriate celebration of community responses with the continued need to working on systemic change, ensuring income security. Apart from central government and community organisations, we highlighted the role of local authorities who are uniquely positioned to act because of their local knowledge, but who also require sufficient, sustainable funding in order to be able to respond.

In **Workshop 3 - What might a better future look like?** - we imagined together what our food future could look like. Visions included a system where everybody would have access to sustainable, affordable, good quality, organic and locally produced food, with no need for trade-offs or foodbanks. A food system, that is compassionate and fair to producers and consumers, and where everyone can get financial support quickly from frontline services, when in crisis. In terms of a 'breakthrough' solutions, we discussed different ways to ensure income security, including benefit adequacy and minimal income guarantees (including Universal Basic Income) as well as addressing both sides of food security equation - demand and supply.

Our final **Workshop 4 - What can be done to improve things from where we are?** – focused on how specific policy responses to improve food security might be designed with direct and meaningful input from people with lived experience. We took 5 key themes identified in workshop 3 (see next page) as our starting point and, from there, started to explore future participatory projects (see page 4).

All of the questions are interesting and important but, in our experience, the more precise the project, the more likely to achieve results. So, whilst the organisations involved committed to continuing to hold and work on the long list between us, our final session sought to identify and develop 3 priorities. This was intended as a creative springboard to future project design, not to commit anyone at this stage.

5 Key Themes - Access to healthy, affordable food

- 1. Income Adequacy and Security** - ensuring everyone has financial resources to be able to afford healthy food
 - what is an 'adequate income'? Who decides? And how is it calculated?
 - How do policy interventions (e.g. Benefit cap, sanctions, UC waiting times or work allowance) support and/or undermine income/benefit adequacy?
 - what does **income security** mean? How can it be measured/monitored?
 - What supports and/or threatens security of income?
 - What might be the place for schemes to ensure sufficient money for all, without condition or means test (e.g., Universal Basic Income, Basic Income Floor, National Living Wage, Living Wage etc)?
 - what is the **relationship between sources of income and food insecurity** (national measures over time and lived experience)?
 - are food insecurity measures/targets a potential useful political lever?
- 2. Crisis Support** - ensuring no one is left without food because of acute financial crisis
 - where can/do people go to **access advice/support** in a personal financial crisis? What is their experience? And how does that affect their later journey?
 - how are people supposed to get support and help if they can't get there?
 - meeting immediate need v tackling underlying issues
 - what are the appropriate **roles for the community sector, local and national government** in responding to acute financial crisis?
 - What is the role, if any, for food banks / 3rd sector emergency food provision?
- 3. Additional Provision** – ensuring ongoing help is available for those struggling to afford food
 - what is the appropriate **place/benefit of additional provision** (e.g. Free School Meals, Household Support Fund, Warm Home scheme) in helping households to afford food?
- 4. Food Access/Adequacy** - ensuring everyone can access good healthy sustainable, locally sourced food
 - **geographical access** to sources of reasonably priced, sustainable food (without need to travel long distances) - food deserts, rural areas
 - **personal/household access** - access to supermarkets and/or online shopping; access to means to cook food
 - what are the appropriate places/systems for **distributing surplus food**?
- 5. Actors and power in the food system – ensuring fair food systems**
 - **who does what** in shaping affordable access to good food? and **who gets to decide**?
 - How does the market shape food prices (for different products)? And could that be influenced? How do you encourage positive food choices without making decisions for people?
 - What does it mean to **balance sufficiency/enough v growth** - for organisations and economy?
 - How to **balance food costs as % of household budget v fair prices and pay for producers/distributors**
 - What are the wider implications of formal partnerships between **supermarkets and larger community food providers**?

3 Future Participatory Project Ideas

Income adequacy

Sufficient income provides agency and allows people to plan their lives - not only creating choices around food (for example cooking in bulk, freezing meals), but also housing, vehicles, energy bills. By adequacy we mean “knowing your electricity is paid for and you can buy anything you need and a bit of what you fancy”.

Future participatory work around income adequacy might explore how to build a social security system that meets people’s needs in a secure way, including lived experience of whether or not existing benefit levels allow people to meet all of their nutritional needs. It could also include looking at how people’s purchases would change with an increase in income - would they buy better quality foods? Although connecting with wider work, such as that on Minimum Income Standards, participatory work done in this space would have to start with concrete, rather than abstract terms, defined by participants, i.e. what does it mean to be financially secure for you?

Crisis support

Effective crisis-support systems that all those in need can easily access (practically as well as in terms of entitlement) would reduce, and potentially eliminate, reliance on food banks. This support system would need to be locally responsive and determined with minimum standards (evidence-based) set in national policy or guidance.

To understand how such crisis-support would need to operate requires a wide group of stakeholders needs to come together, including local authorities, central governments, people with lived experience, GPs, food banks, welfare rights advisors etc. A first step would be to map where responsibilities sit and the roles played by different actors (government, third sector, business), then to evaluate existing interventions – from the perspective of all those involved, including recipients, to inform future policy.

User-led research could help to better understand what support people access and how, and what they need - not constrained by policy silos. From there, we could work with other actors to develop a pilot and evaluation structure. To achieve such a project through participatory methods would involve a process based on relationship building, where improving trust between all participants would be key.

Surplus Food

Discussions around emergency food provision (for those in financial crisis) are too often conflated with re-distribution of food which is surplus to requirements. Whilst being clear that food security for all must be ensured without resulting to redistribution of surplus, we would also like to see projects which enable communities and business to work together to avoid food waste. A participatory project involving a wide range of stakeholders could be key to exploring questions such as how/why the system produces excess? And what might be done with it? What are the best ways to enable everyone – including those in financial need – to access redistributed food with dignity and choice?

Feedback and Evaluation

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 lived 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)

Process / Methods – Challenges and Learning from Experience

Challenge and/or Benefit	Learning
Recruiting and sustaining appropriate number and diversity of attendees	Value of reminders, checking-in and ensuring meeting expectations; also 'currency' of pre-existing relationships between individuals and organisations
Managing group dynamics, especially with diverse attendees, difficult topics and opposing views	Ensure facilitators fully equipped to handle sensitive, emotive conversations
Sufficiently engaging participants, especially in virtual discussion	Balance of small group and plenary sessions – mix of facilitation styles and exercises
Emotional toll of discussing difficult or traumatic experiences, but also of holding the same conversations over many years, with a feeling that little if anything is changing for the better	Remember to leave space to acknowledge and accommodate emotional effort involved in participation, offer appropriate support
Importance of fully appreciating 'lived experience' without further stigmatising or talking down to participants	Avoid paying lip-service and/or only focusing on negative life-experiences, instead focus on resilience and provision of care
Value of project lasting over an extended period of time	After 12 months, 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
Importance of building relationships and establishing group dynamics, but the challenge of getting busy people to make time to engage	Try to be clear about the intentionality and benefit of seemingly 'social-spaces' (e.g. sharing lunch before main meeting)
Maintaining appropriate balance in dynamics and relationships	Encouraging and enabling all to participate on a personal level (not just in job roles), but also facilitating meaningful discussions without anyone feeling 'put on the spot; or defensive
Balancing dichotomy between valuing everyone's ideas and interests with the difficulty of narrowing down a topic sufficiently for meaningful discussion when there are too many varying perspectives	Avoid trying to cover too much in any one session – better to list "topics to come back to" then focus on selected issues, rather than risking spreading discussions too thinly and/or people feeling their particular concern was not acknowledged

What happens next

Church Action on Poverty is currently scoping out the possibility of further deliberative policy work, using a similar approach to the series of events in autumn 2021. This work will likely involve the creation of a new national Participatory Panel with people with a range of direct experiences of poverty, including many of those who participated in the Food Experiences Panel.

The hope that the themes that we will explore in this work will draw on the insights and ideas which have emerged from the autumn policy sessions, but will also be guided by the interests of the Participatory Panel themselves. We are in discussion with two key funding partners, and hope to be able to share plans for this work in the near future.

For further discussion regarding participatory methods and/or responses to food insecurity, please contact: Niall Cooper (niallc@church-poverty.org.uk), Hannah Lambie-Mumford (h.lambie-mumford@sheffield.ac.uk) or Jane Perry (janeperry@live.co.uk)



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