

AN ONGOING EMERGENCY :

*barriers and solutions in access to
fair food for people seeking asylum*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and objectives

Food insecurity is an issue that generally affects the poorest and most vulnerable in society. With very limited income support, exclusion from mainstream benefits and the right to work, people seeking asylum frequently struggle to meet their basic needs and are at high risk of food insecurity. As well as the risks associated with low income, they face additional barriers in accessing food which are specific to this community. This project looked at the nature of food insecurity experienced by people seeking asylum and explored and assessed the current provision of support in Glasgow in addressing this issue.

Methods used

The project consisted of a first stage of semi-structured discussions with individuals with lived experience of the asylum system, and with key informants from food provision organisations, asylum support networks and asylum support organisations. These took place online due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

The second stage of the project took the form of a participatory action research (PAR) group, who looked at the themes emerging from the first stage of the project and conducted further research to produce a set of recommendations.

Key findings

The barriers people seeking asylum face in accessing food are fundamentally structural

01

Asylum seekers' systemic exclusion from socioeconomic rights means that they are unable to access food that meets their needs. Rather than living through a temporary food crisis or cash shortage, people seeking asylum live in an 'ongoing emergency' with regards to their food security as they have no access to longer term support. In order to tackle food insecurity in asylum seekers, this must be addressed. However, there are examples of good practice to relieve pressure on asylum seekers' income, such as providing support with other essential costs, like digital connectivity and transport.

There is a reliance on the third sector to feed people seeking asylum

02

While people seeking asylum remain in a marginalised position, there will be a huge reliance on the third sector to meet their daily needs. As asylum seekers do not have access to public funds, they are shut off from other areas of support and struggle to get by day-to-day without food provision from charities. Limitations of third sector provision are more keenly felt due to the fact that they rely on this. A 'cash first' approach to food insecurity may not be effective as asylum seekers do not always have the right to access the appropriate funds. As such, charities need to be supported to provide a service which meets the needs of these communities.

Feeding diverse communities presents significant challenges to organisations

03

People seeking asylum have distinct requirements and organisations do not always feel able to meet their needs. Asylum seekers reported that they prefer to cook food from scratch that they know is suitable to their tastes and cultural and dietary needs. Food banks feel they have a role to play as they know that there is minimal provision for asylum seeking communities in certain areas. However, they are limited by funding restrictions and often rely on donated and surplus food to feed their communities, which can frustrate efforts to provide diverse, culturally appropriate and healthy offerings. Furthermore, as asylum seekers rely on this food for longer periods and to a greater extent than other groups, this inhibits access to food that is suitable for their cultural and dietary needs in the long-term. Meeting these needs requires reform of the supply of food banks, however forums for discussing these issues and providing advice about content for food parcels for people of different cultures were welcome by providers.

Geography is a major determinant in accessing food

04

As asylum accommodation is offered on a no-choice basis, geography is a huge factor in asylum seekers' access to food. There is inequality in terms of service provision across the city and the location of asylum accommodation can often mean that people seeking asylum are out of reach of services and shops that provide and sell appropriate food and costs for travelling to buy food reduces the budget available for purchasing good food. Local food organisations may not have the necessary knowledge to provide culturally appropriate food and practitioners' knowledge is very important here to find appropriate local services. There is a need as well for more local solutions which meet the needs of people seeking asylum and avoid long journeys for appropriate food.

Choice is central to dignified access to food, but is not always in evidence


05

As people seeking asylum rely heavily on food banks, choice is vital for dignity as well as for a healthy, balanced and culturally appropriate diet. Food projects use a wide variety of different models that afford different degrees of choice, however, in spite of this, many people in the asylum system feel they are not offered choice in food provision, they do not have the right to choose the food they receive from food banks and there is a sense of "beggars can't be choosers". There needs to be explicit space in all models of food provision where people know they have the right to choose the food they eat. In order to understand the needs of communities, the importance of building relationships and of active listening was also stressed. Solutions such as providing shop or supermarket vouchers or emerging models of food provision such as pantries were praised for their capacity for giving choice.

Discrimination and stigma remain significant obstacles

06

The experience of direct or systemic forms of discrimination can be a barrier to food security for asylum seekers. Participants reported experiencing racism and discrimination due to their status and perceived poverty while accessing food. Pervasive myths around asylum seekers in society are seen as the cause of this. These experiences are demoralising and can result in further isolating asylum seekers as they may be deterred from seeking out help in future. Furthermore, gatekeeping combined with a lack of understanding of the asylum process means that some food provision is poorly designed to meet the needs of asylum seekers, who often find it challenging to access support when they are in need. An increased understanding of the asylum system, relevant research and experiences among service providers as well as involving those with lived experience in the planning of policy and services was proposed as a way to combat this.



"We 'asylum seekers' are not greedy. We are just human beings who are trying to survive with the little that we have. We survive on the bare minimum, the minimum that fails to meet our needs.

I will take on every opportunity to survive, if I can get the opportunity.

Living in a restricted environment where I have to beg for food is inhumane. It makes me feel like I am less worthy.

I would love to shop at different supermarkets just like everyone else."

- group participant



INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity is an everyday feature of life for people seeking asylum in the UK. Research and engagement to inform the Scottish Government Ending Destitution Together strategy indicated that people seeking asylum reported more barriers and issues than other people with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). Following on from this, the Scottish Government Tackling Food Insecurity Team commissioned this research project to provide recommendations on addressing the challenges and barriers relating to food insecurity which may be specific to members of the asylum community. The project looked at the nature of food insecurity experienced by people seeking asylum and explored and assessed the current provision of support in addressing this issue in Glasgow. It brought the various stakeholders into open dialogue and looked to elevate the voices of people with lived experience of the issues and allow them to bring to the fore the issues related to food insecurity that they find most pressing. The project employed a coproduction methodology, which posits that those affected by policy are well-placed to help design it.

The project took place from July to December 2020 and consisted of a first stage of discussions with people with lived experience of the asylum system and food insecurity, as well as key

informants from asylum support and food provision organisations. A second stage took place thereafter in which a participatory action research (PAR) group was formed of individuals from the asylum seeking community with input from representatives from asylum support and food provision organisations. This project was commissioned prior to the onset of the COVID-19 but work began in summer 2020, several months into the pandemic. There were many changes in the way that food was accessed and distributed as a result of the pandemic, as well as additional support that had been made available as part of the public health response.

This project was carried out by the Govan Community Project (GCP), a community-based organisation situated in Govan, south-west Glasgow. Govan is the area of initial dispersal for many people seeking asylum, and ranks as one of the most deprived areas in Scotland across a range of indicators according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (2020). GCP works with people living in Govan and the wider Glasgow area, and provides a variety of activities and services to support people seeking asylum and other members of the diverse community. GCP's work is driven by the needs of its community members and has worked to give voice and empowerment to people in the asylum system.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

People seeking asylum and food insecurity

Food insecurity is recognised to have a range of negative impacts on those who experience it and is the result of a confluence of adverse factors. While the factors that affect the general population also affect people seeking asylum, people seeking asylum can experience them more acutely and there are a range of factors that are unique to this community. The Scottish Government recognises food insecurity as “a lack of access to adequate or appropriate food due to a lack of resources” (Scottish Government, 2021, p11). In addition to this, food is an expression of cultural belonging and identity. This is important in reconstruction of identity of people who have migrated (Koc & Welsh, 2002) and could be seen as especially important for forced migrants.

There is a substantial body of research internationally which shows that refugee and asylum seeking populations in high income countries face a far greater prevalence of food insecurity when compared to their host populations. Economic marginalisation or exclusion are usually identified as central to

these experiences (Henjum et al., 2019; Hadley et al., 2007; Sellen et al., 2002), however additional barriers have also been identified. Some of these are geographical factors, such as distance from shops and lack of access to affordable transport (Southcombe, 2008), cultural factors, like knowledge around ingredients and recipes (Hadley & Sellen, 2006; Willis & Buck, 2007) as well as lack of access to culturally preferred foods (Southcombe, 2008; Hadley et al., 2010). Policies which physically separate people seeking asylum from other immigrant communities have also been suggested as damaging social support and networks which can improve food security (Henjum et al., 2019). In migrant communities, language barriers have also been cited as a barrier to food security (Himmelgreen et al., 2006). Within the UK specifically, the largest food bank provider, the Trussell Trust, found that people seeking asylum are vastly overrepresented among their food bank users. In spite of making up less than 0.1% of UK households, people seeking asylum account for 3.7% of food bank users (Loopstra & Lalor, 2017).

People seeking asylum in Scotland

UK Home Office policy is to accommodate people seeking asylum in local authorities throughout the UK through a process called dispersal. People seeking asylum are housed throughout the UK and accommodation is offered on a no-choice basis, usually in hard to let properties. Glasgow City is currently the only local authority in Scotland which accepts people seeking asylum through the dispersal scheme. Glasgow's asylum seeking population is significant, being the single biggest dispersal point in the UK (Sturge, 2021). As asylum is a reserved issue, alongside other areas of immigration, asylum policy and support is controlled and administered by the UK Home Office. As such, the broad parameters of the lives of those seeking asylum are set by the UK government at Westminster.

Studies looking at food insecurity in these populations often conflate both refugees and people seeking asylum as "refugees", encompassing people who have been granted refugee status alongside people who are currently in the asylum system. People seeking asylum have made a formal application for asylum under the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees but are awaiting a decision on whether they will be granted refugee status. While refugees are entitled to the same social and economic rights as any UK citizen, people seeking asylum have far more restricted access to rights. Given that extreme financial vulnerability is a central cause of food insecurity, it is important to look at people seeking asylum separately as these conditions of their residence in the UK mean that they are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. In recent decades, the asylum process has become increasingly politicised, with entitlement to benefits and other rights curtailed, having been characterised as pull factors in attracting people to the UK. People seeking asylum are prohibited from working except in very exceptional

and rare circumstances and so generally rely on asylum support payments as their sole source of income. In 1999 asylum support was separated from mainstream welfare and was paid at 70% of income support levels. This exclusion from mainstream provision led to an increase in poverty and destitution among people seeking asylum (Bloch & Schuster, 2005) and in 2008 the UK Government broke the link with income support which led to further disparity between asylum and income support and resultant destitution among people seeking asylum.

People seeking asylum in the United Kingdom are generally supported under Section 95 of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. Support is given in the form of accommodation and cash currently set at £39.63 per week. Most people seeking asylum subsist below the poverty line while awaiting a decision. Taking into account that asylum accommodation and utility bills are paid for separately, current levels of asylum support mean that a single asylum seeker will be living 74% below the relative poverty line, and an asylum-seeking family consisting of a couple and one child under 14 would be living 63% below the relative poverty line (Asylum Matters, 2018). This means that people seeking asylum frequently struggle to meet their basic needs and cannot afford essential items including clothes, shoes, or medicine (Refugee Action, 2013). In June 2020, there were around 54 000 people awaiting a decision on their asylum case in the UK, with over 70% having waited more than 6 months (The Migration Observatory, 2020). Data is only available for the number of cases who have received an initial decision within six months, so it is not possible to know how long the 'average' asylum case takes, but individuals and families can spend many years in limbo in these circumstances waiting for the outcome of their asylum claim.

These issues are exacerbated for those who have had their asylum claims refused by the Home Office. These people are provided with support under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act. To qualify for this support following a refused asylum application, a person must be destitute and be taking "all reasonable steps" to leave the UK, or have a recognised impediment to doing so. Like those receiving Section 95 support, those in receipt of Section 4 support are supplied with a card called an ASPEN card onto which their asylum support payment of £39.63 is loaded, however Section 4 recipients are unable to withdraw cash. This means they are even more restricted in where and how they spend their support money, which leads to increased vulnerability (Mulvey, 2009). Furthermore, many refused asylum seekers would rather remain destitute than apply for government support because they fear it will result in deportation, meaning their only recourse for support is through civil society, such as charity or religious organisations (Crawley et al., 2011).



The range of national and ethnic backgrounds which make up the asylum seeking population which some have labelled "hyperdiversity" (Sigona et al., 2014) have implications for services such as food provision in terms of meeting the diverse needs of the population. The most common countries of nationality of people seeking asylum in the UK in 2019 were Iran, Albania, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan (The Migration Observatory, 2020).

This mirrors GCP's client data, with Iran forming by far the largest nationality group, followed by a significant number of people from Iraq. There were no clients with Albanian nationality, however Salvadorans were a significant third largest group. Those with Afghan and Pakistani nationality also feature prominently. GCP alone has clients from over 60 nationalities. This is not necessarily representative of the asylum seeking population in Glasgow, however it provides a useful snapshot of the people accessing services.

As immigration policy is a reserved matter, many aspects of the lives of people seeking asylum mentioned above are controlled by the UK government at Westminster. However, as Mulvey (2018) points out, there is scope for and evidence of divergence of social policy between the UK and Scottish governments which affects the day to day lives of people seeking asylum. A universalist approach in Scotland has led to greater inclusion of people seeking asylum within areas of social welfare policy and rights, and in this way people seeking asylum can be seen as enjoying a form of "social citizenship" in Scotland which may not be the case in other parts of the UK. This distinct approach is made explicit through the New Scots integration strategy, which aims to support 'integration from day one' of arrival of people seeking asylum, rather than once refugee status has been granted. However, these efforts can be hindered by the NRPF condition placed on people seeking asylum at UK level, which precludes the access of people seeking asylum to certain benefits and housing. The Scottish Government and COSLA Ending Destitution Together strategy explicitly aims to address and mitigate the exclusion of people subject to NRPF from support services during times of crisis.

Food in Scotland

This project takes place against a backdrop of a proliferation of emergency food providers in the UK and increasing institutionalisation of emergency food provided by civil society as part of the welfare state within the wider population. In 2011, the Trussell Trust provided 5,726 three-day emergency food supplies to people in Scotland. By 2018/19 this had risen to 210,605 (The Glasgow Indicators Project, 2019). Food parcel distribution saw dramatic growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Independent food aid providers reported an increase of 110% in 2020 compared with the same period in 2019 (Independent Food Aid Network, 2020), with new food banks being created to meet the need, while the Trussell Trust network reported similar growth (The Trussell Trust, 2020). The food bank landscape in Scotland is varied with both Trussell Trust network food banks and diverse independent food banks operating throughout the country (Menu for Change, 2019). The Trussell Trust network is a paradigm of emergency food provision. As part of this model, need is assessed by referral agencies who issue a voucher.

This voucher is exchanged for an 'emergency food parcel' which contains three days' food. This is designed for emergency support in a crisis and yet this is often the main recourse for people experiencing chronic food poverty.

This model has evolved over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic with e-referrals provided rather than physical vouchers.

Other models of food provision have been developed by civil society organisations as ways of addressing food poverty in a more dignified way. For example, the pantry model has been offered as an alternative to food banks whereby members pay a small fee every week and have access to a wider range of different types of food from which they can choose what they need. In this way, the model can be seen as changing the dynamic of charity and recipient, and offering more autonomy and dignity to their members.

The Scottish Government has expressed a desire to tackle food insecurity through three policy themes (Scottish Government, 2021), the first of which are measures to prevent food insecurity through increased incomes. These address work, social security and reducing household costs. These measures largely do not affect people seeking asylum as they do not have the right to work in the UK, have no access to public funds, or are not liable for taxes or rent.

The second of these themes is to promote dignified and 'cash first' responses to food insecurity. This theme includes a set of 'dignity principles' which should inform best practice within food projects. These principles are: involving people with direct experience in decision making; recognising the social value of food; providing opportunities to contribute; and leaving people with the power to choose. The 'cash first' approach includes schemes such as the Scottish Welfare Fund, administered by local authorities, which provide community care grants and crisis grants. Again, as people seeking asylum do not have access to public funds, they are unable to benefit from these payments. However, the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) has developed a leaflet to help frontline providers make sense of the cash first approach and are developing this resource to make it better tailored to support asylum seekers and people with NRPF. The Fair Food fund has also been established to promote more dignified models and ways of addressing food insecurity within communities, which can support people seeking asylum through food and voucher provision in local projects.

The third theme is coordinating action on food policy which aims to address food insecurity across different policy areas. This has been consolidated in the Good Food Nation policy which aims to ensure access to affordable, locally produced and nutritious food. It states the ambition that by 2025 Scotland will be "a Good Food Nation, where people from every walk of life take pride and pleasure in, and benefit from, the food they produce, buy, cook, serve, and eat each day" (Scottish Government, 2014).



The National Taskforce for Human Rights Leadership has set out a statutory framework for human rights which would incorporate socio-economic rights, including the right to food. These recommendations have been accepted by the Scottish Government. Consideration will need to be given within these policy areas to ensure they are inclusive of people seeking asylum.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen significant changes in the ways in which food is accessed, provided and distributed. The 'stay at home' message restricting travel and national lockdowns made accessing appropriate food an even more challenging task for people seeking asylum, while many food providers had to close or reorganise their services significantly (Dempsey & Pautz, 2021). In response to this, flexible funding was made available by the Scottish Government during the pandemic to local authorities and charities with specific provision for those struggling to access food, which could be allocated to those in need without restrictions. For people seeking asylum who had their support stopped and were destitute, they were able to access financial support through the Red Cross Hardship fund to meet their essential living costs during the pandemic. This is in addition to destitution grants already offered by charities prior to the pandemic to people seeking asylum without government support and unable to meet their basic needs.

METHODS

Discussions

The first stage of the project took the form of six engagement events for individuals with lived experience of food insecurity in the asylum process, three events with key informants from food provision organisations, and two events with key informants from integration networks and asylum support agencies. These events took the form of semi-structured discussions which took place online due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

This project was commissioned prior to the onset of the COVID-19 but work began in summer 2020, several months into the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about many changes in our lives, including in the way people access and provide food.

Furthermore, additional support had been made available as part of the public health response. Participants in discussions were initially asked to reflect on their 'normal' circumstances. However, it became clear the ways in which services had evolved and changed irrevocably in response to the pandemic and that there was great uncertainty as to what 'normal' would look like once the pandemic was over. This necessarily impacted the responses people were able to give around services. Where possible, I have tried to make clear the distinctions between pre-COVID, current, and potential future provision, however these lines were often blurred.

Participatory Action Research

Following these discussions, a second stage of the project took place in which a participatory action research (PAR) group was formed of people with lived experience of the asylum system and food insecurity, with input from service providers. The themes that emerged were summarised and presented to the PAR group who took part in a range of discussions and meetings, conducted their own research and then produced their set of recommendations for action to be taken following on from this project.

"[PAR] rests on two principles: the pursuit of social change and the democratisation of the knowledge process. The point of action research is to change both the situation and to change power relations in terms of who holds the knowledge."

(Hall et al., 2017)

A PAR methodology was chosen as it is an empowering approach, underpinned by principles of coproduction, which is that people using services should define and plan (and sometimes deliver) the services that they need. Coproduction and PAR aim to empower people to make their own decisions about things that affect them. The aim is to inform policy and practice and move from policy that is done about and to people to policy that is led by the people it affects, making use of their knowledge and expertise. The overall aim is to give people a voice in policy and society and improve connections between policy makers, service providers and people with lived experience. A study by Strokosch & Osborne (2016) also found that the involvement of people seeking asylum in the coproduction of public services has a positive impact on integration, social inclusion and can allow them to "act as citizens" through this participatory role (Strokosch & Osborne, 2016).

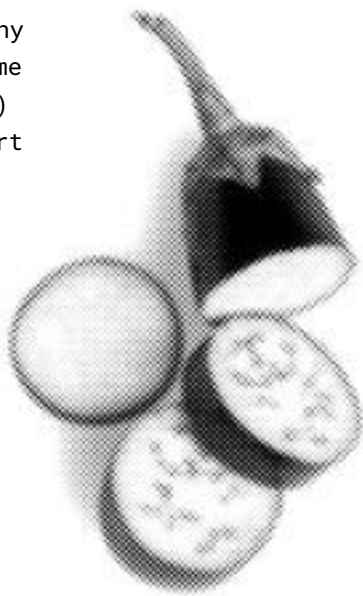
Good food definitions

Participants in all group discussions were initially asking to define what they saw as 'good food' and 'good eating'. This was to get people thinking about what is important to them and to have a shared idea on what good food means to us to refer to in later discussions, where participants were asked to reflect on the extent to which they felt that people seeking asylum were able to access good food in Glasgow. The themes of choice, control and the social value of food strongly mirror the dignity principles outlined on page 7.

**GOOD
FOOD**

Healthy and fresh

Healthy food was seen as central to ideas of good food. Good food was seen as something that was not merely to fill your stomach, but to provide a nutritionally balanced diet. Fresh fruit and vegetables were essential for this. Some food providers drew a contrast between the settled population and more recent arrivals in this area, outlining that many people seeking asylum preferred to have fresh food to cook from scratch, and so they had adapted their service in response to this. Healthy food was understood to be subjective and dependent on the person ("what one person calls healthy food is not the same as another person") and was seen as part of a holistic view of health feeding into a healthy mind, body and attitude. This idea of good food as healthy food was particularly important to participants with underlying health conditions.



Choice

Choice was a strong theme in all of the groups: that good food is something that you choose according to your own preferences and needs. This is food that is suited to your tastes as well as your health needs. This could be having the option of halal food, or food that is familiar ("food from my country, that I've been eating since I was a child"), or just being able to choose food that you enjoyed. Choice was seen to be important for its own sake ("choice is a basic human right") Having options of food that was from one's home country was conducive to eating healthy food as it was food they were familiar with enough to know what was good for them.

Control

Being in control of what you eat and how you eat it was seen as important to good eating. This included having a good routine, being able to eat at your own pace and process your food well without not rushing. Having your own environment in which to cook and eat was important, as good eating was seen as a relaxing activity that took place in your own home. Many of the participants in the asylum system emphasised that cooking the food themselves from scratch was important to ensure the food was suitable for them and that the ingredients were healthy.

"Even simple vegetables
- we prefer that rather
than the cooked food
where you have to read
all the labels. Sometimes
children have allergies
or there is food that
is forbidden for us.
That's why I prefer to
cook food in my home."

Asylum seeker

Social

The social importance of food was also acknowledged, linked in with the idea of eating at home. Good eating was sharing with other people, spending time with friends and family eating together. This reflects the dignity principle that recognising the social value of food is essential for dignified access to food. However, this was not always prioritised by people in the asylum system as they usually emphasised the type of food first and foremost. This is likely because the context of eating is a lesser consideration for those who have insecure access to food.



FOOD LANDSCAPE FOR PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM IN GLASGOW

People in the asylum system reported accessing food from a wide variety of different sources. Their experience of food in Glasgow was characterised by a lot of movement by the need to travel around to find suitable food, affordable prices and support from organisations. Food was obtained from supermarkets, specialist shops and food bank support.

Supermarkets

Almost all people seeking asylum used supermarkets, however they expressed that this was not always through choice. Many could not afford to transport costs to go further afield for preferred food, so they had to go to the closest and cheapest option, which was the supermarket. Others were forced to travel as there were no shops in their immediate vicinity that sold fresh food.

Participants on Section 4 asylum support are unable to withdraw cash, so this meant that they could not visit smaller retailers that did not accept cards and were obliged to go to supermarkets. Some supermarkets offered culturally specific foods, such as halal food. Some participants found that even the cheapest supermarkets were too expensive for people seeking asylum and that they had to shop around to get food they could afford.

Specialist food shops

People seeking asylum also visit specialist food shops, such as halal shops, African or Asian shops as they want to be able to cook traditional food from their country. These are often clustered in specific areas and so require transport to get to them, which is an additional expense. Many felt that they would prefer to shop at these shops, but they are often prohibitively expensive.

“When I want to buy food from my country, I have to save up. I’ll eat food from my country about once a month, I cannot afford to buy it on a daily basis because of the prices.”

Asylum seeker

Charities

It was considered that most people seeking asylum need to get food parcels from charities in order to have enough to eat. In spite of their relatively small population, participants from food organisations reported that people seeking asylum could often make up the majority of food bank users

Food projects in Glasgow offer a wide range of different services, from food parcel collection and delivery, meal delivery, veg boxes, community cooking classes, community meals and community pantries. Within our discussion groups, people seeking asylum for the most part did not discuss attending community meals or services that provided ready-made food. This could be as a result of people seeking asylum’ preferences outlined above for preparing and cooking food oneself. It could also reflect community meals’ emphasis on connections and integration - if a person is experiencing food insecurity, they may not prioritise community connections as they are struggling to meet their basic food needs. This could also be indicative of people’s experiences during the pandemic as community meals were not generally on offer.

Only people with experience of destitution, living without any form of financial support, discussed going to places with ready made food, perhaps as a result of a disrupted home environment where cooking one’s own meals was not possible.

Most food distribution projects that were not part of the Trussell Trust network did not use a referral process and accepted presence at the project as evidence of need. However there is necessarily a focus on vulnerable individuals. One exception to this were pantries whose membership was often restricted to the local area.



Food projects' supply comes from supermarket donations, public donations and is sometimes supplemented with purchases, however this is contingent on funding. Some projects also offered food vouchers, either in lieu of or alongside food parcels, but again this is funding dependent. Some projects offered meat and vegetarian options and made extra efforts to source halal food. Other organisations had chosen to be vegetarian by default to avoid issues with suitable meat. FareShare is an organisation which redistributes food from supermarket supply chains, and this was a major source of food supply for many projects. As these donations consist of surplus food, organisations have no choice in what they receive. This reliance on donations means that it is difficult to offer specific items that might appeal to a diverse community, such as people seeking asylum.

In order to offer a wider variety of foods, such as African and Eastern European food, providers were usually obliged to buy from wholesalers. These purchases were dependent on funding, and this type of providers were few and far between, and often oversubscribed.

"Food banks do not give us the African food we crave - we are just stuck with tinned stuff."

Asylum seeker

"People have very specific needs, wants and tastes - we try and cater to that but it's not always possible based on the items we receive"

Food bank worker





DISCUSSION THEMES

The first stage of the project consisted of semi-structured discussions with individuals with lived experience of the asylum system and food insecurity, as well as key informants from food provision organisations, asylum support networks and asylum support organisations. Discussions centred on ideas about good food, food insecurity, access to food and support, dignity and meeting communities' needs. Each discussion lasted an hour and a half and took place online via Zoom.

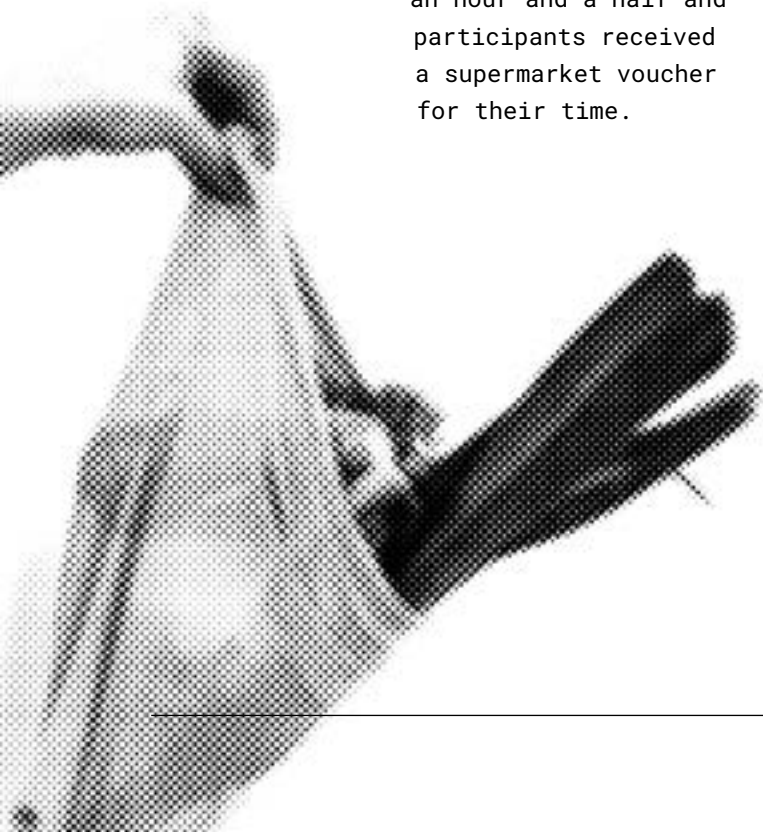
People seeking asylum with experience of food insecurity

This section looks at the themes emerging from six discussions with people with lived experience of the asylum system and food insecurity. Participants were recruited through GCP and other organisations. A large number of the participants had used GCP's food distribution service before or during the pandemic. Some participants were also recruited through other asylum support organisations, some of which already had established lived experience participatory groups. Although these participants were very interested and open to taking part, extra efforts were made to bring in perspectives from individuals who had not previously been involved in this type of research, so recruitment through our own food provision was useful for this purpose.

Selection to take part was an initial survey to check participants met criteria for inclusion: that they were in the asylum system and had experience of food insecurity in the past year (according to the Food insecurity Experience Scale global reference scale - see Appendix 1). Respondents were also asked about other characteristics, such as age, length of stay in Glasgow, country of origin, if they spoke English or not. Out of the respondents who met the initial criteria and who said they would be happy to be contacted with regards to the research, participants were selected in order to meet as wide a range of characteristics as possible (age, sex, nationality, length of time living in the city, marital status and children). Discussions lasted an hour and a half and participants received a supermarket voucher for their time.

Regrettably, one group that was underrepresented in the lived experience discussions was those who did not speak English. This was due to time restrictions and hesitancy with regards to using online conferencing and interpreters, particularly within a larger group that did speak English. Many participants had more limited English skills when they first arrived in Glasgow, and were able to reflect on the challenges they experienced at the time, however it may be that people who currently had limited English would have identified further barriers which are not described here.

Digital exclusion is clearly a concern, and GCP has sought to address this in other areas of our work. As the group discussions took place online due to pandemic restrictions, this risked excluding people who did not have internet connection or a digital device. We tried to mitigate this where possible by offering support through our digital services, however it is likely people without digital access were largely absent from these discussions.



Themes



Income

Money was viewed as the most central determiner of whether lived experience participants could access good food or not. The more money you have, the more options that are available with regards to accessing good food. The minimal allowance provided by the Home Office means that people seeking asylum are limited in their means to access good food. Access to more affordable food also expanded these possibilities, whether through cheaper supermarkets or pantries. Nonetheless, preferred foods, such as food from participants' home countries, were often too expensive to buy, at least on a regular basis. Ways of augmenting income are restricted for people seeking asylum, but organisations providing voucher support was cited by several people as the best way to be able to buy what they needed and gave them much more choice than attending a food bank. However, during the COVID-19 school closures, the families of children on free school meals were provided with Farmfoods vouchers. Some participants welcomed this, while others objected, saying that the government is supposed to be promoting healthy eating but Farmfoods only sells frozen, preserved food. They felt the rationale for this was giving poor quality food to families from poorer backgrounds. It should be noted that the Farmfoods voucher provision was a temporary initiative for free school meal replacements and Glasgow City Council has since reviewed their approach.

People seeking asylum often struggle to meet their basic needs with their limited income. Food is just one cost which needs to compete with other needs on a weekly basis. Organisations providing support in areas of other basic needs meant that money was freed up to spend on food.

One example of this was support with digital connectivity, which was seen as another essential that had to be purchased each month that contended with food, particularly as those with children now need the internet to complete their schoolwork. Organisations which provided support with data top-ups gave more leeway in budgets to purchase better quality food. Another proposal was the provision of internet access as standard in asylum seeker accommodation.



Knowledge and information

Having cultural knowledge and knowledge of available support was highlighted as something which helped participants in the asylum system access good food. Useful knowledge highlighted were things such as where to go for affordable food and which organisations provide free food. Usually, people in their social networks would provide this information, as well as information about organisations which support people seeking asylum and could give them further information. They would also meet people in the community or find out information themselves from public information centres such as libraries.

However, participants did not always know where to go for this information. Not everyone had access to these networks and it was felt there should be a duty on statutory organisations and accommodation agencies to provide this information or to share contact information with local organisations who could support individuals. Some information was contained in asylum support handbooks provided to people seeking asylum, but not everyone had access to that information and it was not always in an accessible format.

It was also felt that organisations should put all the information about services for people seeking asylum on one platform which everyone would have access to. Some participants noted that organisations sometimes get in touch with them directly to help and that they were happy for their contact details to be shared with organisations that can help them.

Knowledge about local food was also important for accessing good food. For people seeking asylum, trying new foods is a big risk that many are not willing to take - another reason people prefer to buy and cook with foods from their home country

“Our amount of money is few, and if we risk we become hungry and maybe we suffer.”

Technology was also seen as an instrument which could promote access to good food. If people seeking asylum did not have access to a smartphone or to Google Maps, they could not find out where relevant places were to obtain food. Providing internet in asylum seeker accommodation would also allow greater access to information which would help access to food.



Food support from organisations and networks

Most of the participants in the asylum system used food banks and felt that generally for people seeking asylum it was not possible to get by without this support. It was generally considered that food banks were doing their best in a difficult situation, as the support comes from communities rather than the government. Although food banks did not provide exactly what they needed, the people that used them appreciated that they were being helped. As most people in the asylum system are living in Scotland without an extended family network, the only help they can get is from organisations in the form of food parcels or vouchers. Food distribution projects which provided food the participants wanted to use promoted access to good food. As a lot of participants came from backgrounds where they do not use a lot of tinned vegetables, getting fresh fruit and vegetables was useful, but not the norm in food banks. Similarly, food banks providing culturally specific food, such as African food banks, were welcome. Correspondingly, food banks providing poor quality or out-of-date food was a barrier to participants eating good food. Often people would not know how to use the food they were given, which could paradoxically result in food bank recipients giving food away to friends, neighbours or other food banks to avoid wastage. There was the feeling that there should be more careful planning on the provision that food banks offer, with health guidance given from the government so organisations can provide a balanced diet for children and adults.

Participants felt there was a lack of attention paid to individual needs and that charities should work with people as individuals rather than as a group.

They felt asking basic questions about intolerances, and food, cultural and religious preferences would promote dignity and give people what they needed, rather than simply giving out whatever they had. People who had health conditions or food intolerances felt particularly badly served and being selective meant that they ended up with a small amount of food.

Participants reported that there were a few food banks that asked what they needed, but generally felt they had little say in what they received from food banks and that it was exceptional to be asked about preferences, with one participant describing her “shock” at being asked about what milk, bread and vegetables she would like. There was the sense that when you are relying on others, be it friends or organisations, you have to be content with a lack of variety and choice and that you do not have the right to request things. There was little space to give an opinion on the provision available as often you just collect your food and walk out. It was felt that organisations should do thorough research about people’s needs and people seeking asylum should have regular input on the food that is provided. There was a feeling that the experience of food banks should be more like that of a supermarket, with food laid out and people able to choose what they want. They could ask people what they need and give people what they want, and avoid bringing what they do not need. This could be in the form of a list of options, and users could also request what they needed next time.

People in social networks and organisations could offer various types of support. Some participants had friends who they could speak to about their problems and who could provide practical help, although that help could not always be relied upon and was normally a one-time thing. Participants who said they could sometimes turn to friends emphasised that these were not friends in the asylum system.



Geography

Access to good food was unequal throughout the city. As asylum accommodation is offered on a no-choice basis, this is a huge factor in people seeking asylum’s access to food. Daily transport costs reduced income available for buying food, while paying for travel to purchase food was a significant barrier to accessing good food, so those who were able to access good food in the local area on foot were at an advantage. Many therefore had the choice of either spending money on transport to get the food that they wanted or to shop nearby without the same level of choice. This could also mean they had to shop at more expensive shops as they could not afford transport to get to cheaper shops. Furthermore, often local supermarkets would not provide more specialised food people needed such as halal food. These barriers were compounded by lack of access to cash, as people who were receiving Section 4 support had to travel even further to find appropriate food shops that would accept card payment. Some participants thought it was worth travelling to food banks which provided better, fresher food which were further away. However, sometimes this did not pay off, as the food provided was not useful, for example, mainly tins rather than the fresh food people were looking for.

Some participants were entitled to a free travel card as college students which helped with daily transport costs and travelling to buy food. One positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic noted was that money that was not being used for transport could be redirected to spend on better food. Food banks delivering food for families that do not live nearby helped with access to better food. It was also proposed that food banks could provide bus tickets so that people on low incomes could travel to them.



Mental health

Good food and good mental health were seen as being interlinked - having good mental health contributed to good eating habits, and having good eating habits meant you felt physically and mentally well. Similarly, depression and anxiety, particularly surrounding progress with asylum cases, led to bad eating habits or not having the energy or will to eat good food. Food insecurity in itself was a source of stress and having stable access to food contributed. This links to definitions given around good food in initial discussions as having control over what you eat. This was heightened for participants with children as they found it difficult to understand the adverse situation they lived in and it was hard to see them suffer. Some participants cited examples of organisations supporting them with wellbeing assistance, such as mindfulness, relaxation, or stress busters, which promoted good eating habits.



Systemic disempowerment, discrimination and stigma

Participants felt that people in the asylum system were very resilient and would be able to care for themselves, were it not for the systemic barriers they faced. This disempowerment was seen as a personal challenge for some as they never had to ask for help prior to seeking asylum in the UK. These were both legally entrenched barriers, such as their position as asylum seekers, and other systemic barriers such as racism, and stigma around people seeking asylum and food poverty.

Some commented that food insecurity would continue to rise in the UK as the government excluded asylum seekers when attempting to address issues around food poverty and insecurity. These systemic factors, such as exclusion from social and economic rights, meant that people were unable to provide themselves with good food, and as long as the government did not address these systemic failings, the numbers of food insecure would continue to rise and attempts to resolve it would be "just putting water in the basket", in the words of one participant.

Racist discrimination was seen as being present in different public spaces, such as in the supermarket or in accessing food support. In the supermarket, several participants felt they were not treated with respect by the workers there and with one saying that they had been profiled for shoplifting. Participants felt very conscious they did not have as much money as other citizens and that they were viewed as such.

Participants thought that lack of understanding in society around immigrants and asylum seekers led people in the wider population to believe myths perpetrated around people seeking asylum. For this reason, there needs to be more education on people seeking asylum in wider society on the circumstances they live in as well as how badly they are treated. It was felt that there are very few people advocating for people seeking asylum at the moment and more people should speak out on the issue.

It was felt that experience of racism and prejudice would cause people would give up and stop asking for help rather than be subjected to discrimination and prejudice. There was also the feeling that they needed to stand up for themselves for the sake of their children so they are not made to feel the same way.

Some participants had previously been involved with organisations and groups where they were empowered to learn about injustices and their rights. This did not necessarily diminish experiences of discrimination, but meant that people felt more capable of confronting it.

There was also a sense of research fatigue in some of the groups among those who had participated in similar projects before. This was a feeling of frustration at lack of progress and that projects such as these had never changed anything in the past.



Gatekeeping

Food providers creating additional obstacles to accessing services was a barrier to accessing good food. This could consist of asking unnecessary questions or general attitude towards service users, such as “treating people as if they wanted to beg”. It was felt that food banks should accept that a person is in need if they attend, and not need to know other reasons why they are there. Poor attitudes towards food bank users were doubly damaging to people seeking asylum who may have experienced trauma in the past and had been subject to racism in the UK, and was tantamount to “being traumatised again”. Language barriers were detrimental in accessing food services, which again meant those with low levels of English were doubly discriminated against. Limits on accessing food banks also impacted people seeking asylum negatively as they were not experiencing a one-off crisis but were rather chronic resource shortages that had long-term effects.



Fairness and dignity in service provision

Participants emphasised the importance of fairness and dignity in service provision so people could get support in a dignified way that would make people willing to access help when they needed it. Some highlighted the importance of attitude, such as smiling, making people feel welcome and that it’s okay to ask for something. Volunteers and staff should be “empathetic and therapeutic” to make people feel at ease, and able to talk about their situation and ask for help if required. Key to this was knowledge around the asylum system and the experience of people seeking asylum and immigrants more generally, and it was seen as important to have input in services of people with lived experience of these issues.

Some organisational factors were important in creating a dignified experience, such as making sure food parcels were divided equally so that people get their fair share. In some cases, there would be nothing left for those arriving later in the day and so would have made a wasted journey. Queuing was also seen as humiliating for many of the participants and so having a large space where people

do not have to wait in line or otherwise employing an appointment system would be preferable.



Food providers

This section looks at themes from discussions with key informants from food provision organisations. The participants were 17 representatives of food provision organisations in Glasgow across three discussions. The food provision organisations were wide ranging, from existing food banks, food banks that have been set up as a response to COVID-19, community gardens, community food hubs, community meal providers, community pantries. All of the organisations delivered food throughout the pandemic. Some of these were invited directly to take part with a view to including a range of different types of organisations across different areas of the city. Others were recruited through networks and organisational contacts.

Themes



Building trust and relationships

Food providers saw trust and good relationships at the heart of being able to provide a good service and supporting the people that used their food banks. Participants thought that formal ways of finding out community needs (such as steering groups) were difficult to implement and people felt uncomfortable with them. Instead, food providers generally used more informal methods and built up relationships of trust through regular contact to establish what people needed, such as through conversation or allowing their community members to feel comfortable enough to get their voices heard, and they would then try and adapt their services, but this was not always possible. A food bank's 'community' might extend beyond the local area, as once a good relationship had been established with a service user, they may travel to use the services as they felt connected to the organisation. It was highlighted that few organisations offered just food. They might explicitly offer other services, or 'offer' a place of safety, to be seen and listened to. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a challenge to these community bonds. Food was seen as a way to bring people together, but this has been more difficult in COVID and people have had to find new ways to connect.




Meeting communities' food needs

Food workers were aware of their organisations' limitations in meeting the food needs of their communities. Some organisations drew a direct contrast with their definition of good food and what their service provides. This was often 'emergency food' packages, which relied on donations from the public, as well as membership of organisations such as FareShare. This meant that it was very challenging to meet the needs of a diverse community.


Furthermore, sporadic access to funding streams and food donors meant that food projects could not rely on regular, good quality food or guarantee certain products. Many food providers were aware that food was going to waste as their offerings did not meet the needs and wants of their service users, particularly among the asylum seeking community.

One organisation felt they had a role to play in providing halal food as there were no shops or other organisations providing it in the area. Knowledge of and providing for the distinct requirements of people seeking asylum was seen as a challenge and some food providers expressed that they found it difficult to address this.



“We have the food to meet the calories needed to feed food insecure people [in the area], we probably have that - hundreds of crates of Irish stew and chicken soup - that’s about it. If you’re talking about getting it to the people that really need it, then no way. There could be people in the flats across the road that do not know what we’re about or who are too scared to come. If you’re talking about giving people the choice to eat what they want, then no way. We get what we’re given, and normally it’s bloody tins of Irish stew or chicken soup. If you’re talking about nutritional needs or cultural appropriateness, then no. Literally all we can do is say we’ve got enough to give you the calories to keep you alive. But you’ve really got to like Irish stew and chicken soup.”

“A lot of the asylum seekers that we work with return some of the items in the food packs that we’ve made up... they do not take everything that’s in the actual bags. It’s quite obvious that they have a distinct requirement.”



In some cases, catering for the needs of people from different backgrounds was seen as the responsibility of food banks such as African food projects which were aimed at a specific community.

In spite of organisations feeling unable to meet the needs of food insecure people in their community, people also believed that there was duplication between organisations and suggested better coordination could enable some organisations to focus on specific areas. Some providers also expressed frustration that some people were receiving help from multiple organisations.



Offering choice

The food projects represented by the participants offered a range of different types of services, from prepackaged food parcels to shop-style pantries. Several organisations highlighted that people would choose to travel to their project specifically because it offered choice. During COVID, offering choice was more difficult or not possible. One organisation noted a huge reduction in the asylum seeking population as they had stopped offering choice, so a similar offering could be obtained more locally. Several organisations were considering moving from a food parcel distribution to a food pantry to give people more choice, with one opening their pantry during the course of this project. Most providers indicated that, even if service users were not able to choose their food, they would be able to change items according to their preferences. However, several participants highlighted that their service users had indicated that they were not using some food that was given to them by organisations - particularly tins or things that they did not like. The possibility of setting up a network for advice for content for food parcels of different cultures and nationalities was raised several times.



Connecting people to the organisation

A number of providers expressed concern that they did not think information about their services was reaching the people most in need. During one discussion, the participants agreed on the need for a publicity campaign that would advertise a whole range of services. Several organisations used a text service or social media to promote their services, however it was also highlighted that many of the most vulnerable people would not be able to use these or have access to these. Some organisations highlighted concerns that they did not always know where to refer people outside of their area, and had to work to provide for people beyond their local area as food services were not equally distributed across the city.



Funding

Funding was seen as a challenge and often a barrier to running a service that effectively met the needs of the community. Funding mechanisms were viewed as inflexible and had too many restrictions which meant that services could not adapt to changes in the demands and needs of the community, and also did not account for fluctuations in demand. One participant said their funding application to continue an African food bank had been rejected as there were already food banks in the same area, however these did not cater for this specific community. However, some participants voiced concerns about duplication and the need for greater coordination of funding at a higher level. Applying for funding was seen as not only time-consuming but also emotional as the providers were emotionally invested in their community members and their service. It is worth noting that many funders have been flexible in their funding conditions since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Asylum support providers

This section deals with themes emerging from discussions with asylum support providers. There were 12 participants across two discussions with participants working in different asylum support organisations across Glasgow. As asylum support organisations are less numerous than food providers, there was less need to recruit selectively to ensure a broad range of services. Participants were recruited through personal and organisational contacts and networks as well as through word of mouth.

Themes



Meeting communities' food needs

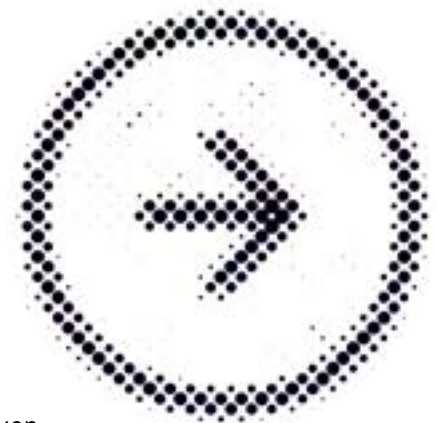
Many of the asylum support providers who participated in the discussions either already provided food or moved to provide food during the coronavirus pandemic to meet the needs of their community members. They had struggled to meet the needs of their community members from external organisations and so had moved their food provision 'in house'. Some had feedback about other services that the food they were given was not appropriate, so they did their best to get suitable food themselves, such as halal meat and fresh vegetables. It was considered that food banks did not provide a lot of fresh food that enables people to cook for themselves, which was preferred by most asylum seekers. The asylum support organisations that did not provide food noted difficulties with trying to locate appropriate food for clients.

Participants highlighted the importance of listening and building trust in order to meet their community members' needs. Organisations worried about losing these connections and community elements of their service during COVID-19 that were so valuable to them and their community members. While recognised that it was good to have diversity in food provision, 'diverse' food banks can only go so far as the issues are structural. However, food projects are essential for people seeking asylum as they do not have access to other areas of welfare and financial support.



Information and connection

There were concerns amongst asylum support providers about people seeking asylum having the right knowledge and connections to access the services and support they needed around food. This is especially an issue for more vulnerable people such as new arrivals or people with lower levels of English. Accessing food was described as "difficult already if you know where to get the stuff, even more difficult if you do not know the area or you do not have connections to people". The pandemic had heightened these vulnerabilities, as the lack of visibility of people in need due to lack of face to face contact or digital access during COVID-19 was a big concern. There was the hope that the asylum accommodation provider would offer the relevant information about services to people seeking asylum but many reported that this was not the case. Participants also highlighted issues with cultural knowledge and discussed that it was a challenge for newcomers to familiarise themselves with the food available in this country.





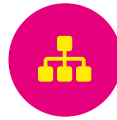
Geographic inequality

Even though some of the organisations operated within a specific geographic area, the 'community' they worked with was not as clear cut and instead spread across the city. Participants highlighted geographic inequality in terms of access to appropriate food and that people seeking asylum often lived in "food deserts", and it was rare that organisations had the funds to provide them with transport costs to travel elsewhere to buy food. When trying to find local solutions to their clients' food insecurity, asylum support providers reported that a lot of local food organisations that they worked with did not have an understanding of culturally relevant food. Furthermore, participants felt that local businesses were slow to respond to the needs of people seeking asylum in the area.



Knowledge and expertise of practitioners

For organisations that operated city wide, it was important to have knowledge on the different services available across the city. This knowledge depends on who you know in the relevant sectors, how long you have been working in the field, among other factors. It was important to have connections with other organisations to know who to contact about what. Participants emphasised the importance of training at every level - one organisation stressed that even delivery drivers should have knowledge of the asylum experience. The online Glasgow free food map was seen as a very valuable resource for practitioners. Some limitations were acknowledged, as mapping requires regular input to keep it updated and information can rapidly go out of date, however it was praised for its collation and centralisation of key knowledge which could be used to find appropriate food for clients. Many felt a more concerted effort at coordination at a higher level was needed, as well as an overarching view of support available and channels for communication between organisations.



Addressing structural issues

Participants agreed that it would be impossible to ensure good and fair food for people seeking asylum without addressing the structural issues that they face. A lot of food provision is structured around assistance for people experiencing temporary food emergencies but is inappropriate for people who need help over a longer period, such as people seeking asylum, who one contributor described as living in an "ongoing emergency". People seeking asylum always face difficult choices with regards to the small support they receive and it is not possible to meet all their basic needs with this. Many people in asylum accommodation, particularly those who are housed in temporary accommodation during the pandemic, do not have adequate facilities for preparing meals. As well as low income, restrictions on asylum seekers' access to cash also inhibited access to good food. Food provision was seen as a sticking plaster on wider structural issues but it was accepted that it would be "disastrous" for people seeking asylum if they were not there.

Summary of points from discussions



The minimal support entitlements of people in the asylum system and exclusion from socioeconomic rights means they are unable to buy adequate and appropriate food. Accessing food through charities is therefore a necessity for most, although it does not always meet their needs. Support from organisations with digital access and transport also relieves pressure on finances.



Cultural knowledge and information improves access to good food. This is a challenge for both the people in the asylum system experiencing food insecurity as well as those who support them, as practitioners struggle to know what support is available, and navigate it to find the appropriate food in an accessible way.



Choice is central to dignified access to food, and many of the food providers who participate said that there is always the option to choose other food or leave what they do not want. However, many people in the asylum system reported that they are seldom or never able to choose food from a food bank as they do not feel they are in a position to refuse or request food.



Asylum seekers are spread across the city and there is a disparity among different areas of the city in terms of appropriate services and goods and services available. Appropriate food is not always accessible and asylum seekers must spend additional income travelling to reach appropriate food.



People in the asylum system report feeling stigmatised and experiencing racism when accessing food. This can lead to them feeling isolated and avoiding seeking out help in the future.



People in the asylum system prefer to cook with fresh food from scratch, preferably with ingredients they are familiar with. However, these items are often the ones which are most lacking in food projects. Organisations feel they do not always have the resources or knowledge necessary to adequately support people in the asylum system. Asylum support organisations often move to provide food themselves when they do not find appropriate food which is accessible to their service users.



The pandemic has set many organisations back in terms of a dignified service that meets the needs of asylum communities as they currently do not have the space to build relationships and understand the needs of their users.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Following on from the discussion with participants in the asylum system and service providers, a participatory action research (PAR) group was set up to build on the results of these discussions to recommend improvements in current provision, delivery methods and practice. PAR utilises coproduction methodology, which values the knowledge and expertise of people who use services in their planning and design.

The PAR group was made up of six people with lived experience of the asylum system and food insecurity, and also had regular input from representatives from service delivery roles. The group was facilitated by myself as a representative of GCP alongside our Community Development student, who also organised wellbeing and reflection elements of the sessions.

The PAR group met fortnightly over the course of three months. The members of the PAR group took on the roles of researchers within the project, analysing the results of discussions and visiting projects to collect their own data and then made their own assessments and recommendations. These meetings largely took place online, however we were fortunately able to get together shortly before the pandemic restrictions

were reimposed for a day of site visits looking at two different food projects. We were glad to be able to support the group members with digital connection throughout the course of the PAR work. Initially, the group got to know one another and set goals and ambitions for the project. We then had meetings and discussions with a member of the Scottish government Food Security team and Trussell Trust Scotland. We conducted two site visits, which are detailed below. Finally we looked at our work, progress and learning over the course of the PAR work and decided on actions and recommendations to follow on from the project. We also held informal meetings alongside these events to keep in touch and for general wellbeing.

Site visits

As a group, we conducted site visits to two food projects operating two different models and approaches to food provision. The aim of the visits was to evaluate the comparative strengths and weaknesses of each model and project in terms of the needs of people seeking asylum. Members of the group were given an introduction to the project and the space by the staff and were encouraged to look around and ask questions. Following the visits, the group members made their own reflections as part of a report evaluating the project, which they could do either as a recording or written document. The results of the visits provided both a useful appraisal of each type of service as well as concrete examples to draw on when deciding the group's recommendations for the project.

Visit 1

The first visit was to a newly opened food pantry based in the southside of the city. The project aims to be a more empowering and dignified way of providing food to those in need. Members pay a nominal annual membership fee and can then have a weekly shop for £2.50 and have a selection including meat, fruit and vegetables. The project receives donations as well as buying food wholesale.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>The space was welcoming and intimate and staff were friendly and approachable, making people feel at ease and welcome. They also adhered to COVID guidelines which made the group feel safe.</p> <p>The registration form process was flexible for those who did not have ID</p> <p>Efforts were made to recruit staff and volunteers with a variety of background and language skills to support communication, with one staff member speaking seven languages</p> <p>Members have the choice of items so they can get things they need and avoid waste.</p> <p>This is seen as a dignified means of obtaining food</p> <p>Being able to visit weekly means that members can get smaller amounts which avoids carrying heavy loads of shopping</p> <p>The pantry looks like an ordinary shop, not a charity shop</p> <p>Happy to spend a small amount as it allowed choice and was seen as a dignified transaction and was far more affordable than supermarkets</p> <p>The pantry membership was restricted to the local area and so members would not have to pay for travel to reach it</p> <p>Food selection and quality is better than most food banks</p> <p>Everyone is able to access it, so it reduces stigma</p>	<p>Does not generally supply food to meet specific dietary or cultural needs</p> <p>Limited to local postcodes so not available for everyone, and few similar projects currently available in other areas</p> <p>Membership is currently full as demand has exceeded the amount the pantry is able to supply</p> <p>The pantry has been promoted by word of mouth and online, but this may not be an appropriate way to reach people seeking asylum, particularly if they do not have an internet connection</p>

In addition to this, one of the group members also visited another pantry in her local area which she reported on. This pantry employed a nutritional food model to encourage members to take a balanced range of foods, which our group member praised. The staff were very helpful and had a tablet for use for translation to tackle language barriers. They also provided recipes and information about other relevant organisations. Again, the drawback with this model which was highlighted was the lack of variety of foods from different countries and cultures.

Visit 2

The second visit was a project in the city centre which offered multiple services, including a food bank. The project provided biweekly food parcels containing both fresh and dry foods that had been donated. The project also offered other ad hoc food services, such as meals around Ramadan, and halal food vouchers.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>The staff are approachable and welcoming</p> <p>There are volunteers with experience of the asylum system and multilingual volunteers</p> <p>It was free to use, requiring no ID</p> <p>Provides halal products and special deliveries during Ramadan</p> <p>Volunteers distribute and deliver food to those who cannot reach the service</p> <p>There are multiple services under one roof</p>	<p>Project relies on donation so choice is limited whereas some specific items are abundant, such as brown bread</p> <p>Practices such as queuing and distributing food outside during the pandemic are undignified</p> <p>Evidence of communication difficulties: e.g. in some instances, users had travelled to obtain vouchers which had run out by the time they had arrived</p> <p>The project does not cater to people with dietary requirements</p> <p>Only a certain group of asylum seeker's cultural needs catered for</p> <p>Not much variety and users are unable to make their own decisions about food</p> <p>Lack of opportunity for user feedback</p>



Project reflection and post-project

The aim of the PAR project was to provide recommendations to the Scottish Government Food Insecurity Team. However, following the conclusion of this project, the PAR group has continued to meet regularly. The group had a discussion to reflect on the project and its achievements and outlined what they saw as the most important elements of the project to them. These included ways in which they benefited on a personal level through their involvement, such as through the relationships forged and the emotional and financial support (vouchers and data top-ups) they received from being part of the group. Growth in confidence was also noted, with one member saying she felt more resilient as a result of being involved with the group and motivated to take action. Another highlighted the consistency and regularity of group meetings as beneficial for her personal wellbeing. The presence of key organisations and individuals at group meetings as well as at the final engagement event, combined with the strong attendance at this event, was empowering and motivational for the group members as they felt that there was the possibility for change and that their voices were being heard.

The group also gave their thoughts on the move to working online necessitated by the pandemic.




The group preferred to work online for general meetings, as meeting face-to-face required difficult, expensive and time consuming travel and online meetings were easier to organise around other commitments such as childcare. It was also felt that attendance at public meetings would not have been as high if they had not been online and it was easier to make connections with different organisations through online meetings. However, the importance of meeting in person was not dismissed, as the group also recognised that it was good to also have regular face-to-face meetings to allow for a physical connection, to get outside and reduce stress, and to understand people better. It was also noted that conference video calls require a huge amount of data use, so support with digital connectivity is necessary for online meetings.

The group evaluated their initial ambitions for the project after its conclusion and reflected on whether they were things that the project had achieved, things they were on the way to achieving, things that they could achieve, or things they no longer thought were possible (either within a project like this or at all). This formed the basis for further action for the group, who continue to meet on a regular basis to work on these collective goals as well as feed into GCP's food strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of the PAR group was to build on the results of the initial discussions with stakeholders to make recommendations on improvements in current provision, delivery methods and practice. These recommendations were set out by the PAR group after reviewing the themes identified in the discussions from the first stage of the project, holding regular meetings and discussions over the course of three months, and conducting additional research. The group produced a set of recommendations for various stakeholders in order to improve food security for people seeking asylum in the short, medium and long-term.

Topic	Stakeholders	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
 <p>Income</p>	<p>UK Government, Home Office, Scottish Government</p>	<p>More consistency of message and action between organisations responsible for welfare such as MEARS, Migrant Help</p> <p>Improved processes in asylum support payment to avoid admin errors which lead to destitution</p> <p>Supermarkets give discount or vouchers to people seeking asylum</p> <p>Increase awareness through mapping of free-to-use cash points to avoid card fees</p> <p>Independent review and research into asylum seeker income</p>	<p>Introduce other benefits such as travel passes, vouchers</p> <p>Allow Section 4 recipients to withdraw cash</p> <p>Aspen card should have facility for basic bank account</p>	<p>Increase the amount of asylum support</p> <p>Support the right for people seeking asylum to work</p>
 <p>Dignity</p>	<p>Food organisations, service users</p>	<p>Ensure food and vouchers are distributed equally and transparently within projects to ensure fairness</p> <p>Avoid queuing where possible</p> <p>Food organisations should actively listen to their service users</p> <p>Food organisations should have policies and practice in place that can be reviewed</p> <p>Food vouchers should ensure equal access</p> <p>Criteria for access should be clear</p>		
 <p>Geography</p>	<p>Food organisations, specialist shops</p>	<p>Food banks should minimise the amount of unnecessary travel e.g. send vouchers to people</p>		

Topic	Stakeholders	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
 <p>Food provision</p>	<p>Food organisations, specialist food supermarkets</p>	<p>Food projects should make efforts to source culturally appropriate food</p> <p>Regional/ specialist supermarkets provide vouchers to people seeking asylum</p> <p>Food provision should be based on a nutritional model</p> <p>Improve links between food projects and culturally appropriate food suppliers</p> <p>Food banks should provide dignified food and should be rejected if it does not meet minimum standards (see below)</p> <p>Standardised approach of supermarkets to food donation - should be donated before it is unusable</p>	<p>Supermarkets should move away from using food banks to get rid of out of date food</p>	
 <p>Choice</p>	<p>Supermarkets, government, funders, pantries</p>	<p>Promote the use of supermarket vouchers to promote choice</p> <p>Government should promote the development of local pantries for choice and dignity</p>		
 <p>Knowledge and information</p>	<p>Mears, Migrant Help, local community and civil society organisations, asylum support organisations</p>	<p>Mears are responsible for welfare and so should signpost people to relevant services</p> <p>Migrant Help should also share information for people through different channels</p> <p>Schools and mosques should have information about local food services</p>	<p>There should be a social media campaign where people can access the information they need using a hashtag</p> <p>Charities should share information about different services and hold regular meetings to discuss goals and visions</p>	

Topic	Stakeholders	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
 <p>Discrimination, stigma and racism</p>	<p>Food organisations, asylum support, anti-racist organisations, people with experience of the asylum system</p>	<p>Training of staff to cultural sensitivities</p> <p>Training of staff in anti-racist practices</p>		
 <p>Gatekeeping</p>	<p>Food organisations</p>	<p>Food projects should be made aware of the sensitivity around providing data for people seeking asylum</p> <p>Ask for minimum information - e.g. name and postcode</p> <p>Avoid asking for details like Home Office numbers</p> <p>Remove limits for accessing support for people in the asylum system</p> <p>Make people aware at first stage if they are eligible for support - avoid taking details or raising expectations</p> <p>Food organisations should make special considerations for destitute people or people with no access to cash (pantry models require cash)</p>		
 <p>Building relationships</p>	<p>Food organisations</p>	<p>Treat people with respect and dignity</p> <p>Organisations should share knowledge and information with service users</p> <p>There should be a transparent process and procedure for complaints about service and complainants should be protected from victimisation</p> <p>Organisations should regularly ask for feedback on service</p>		

Minimum standard test for food providers



Equality test - would I buy this from a shop?



Food should not be expired and should be a reasonable length of time from the expiry date so people have a chance to eat it, e.g. the expiry date of fresh food should be at least 3 days from the date of distribution



There should be choice and options



CONCLUSIONS

The barriers which people seeking asylum face regarding accessing good food are largely structural and require large scale changes to the asylum system, such as an increase in financial support, being granted the right to work and access to public funds. Many of the issues with food banks (such as lack of choice, dignity, poor quality food) are relevant for the wider population, however these are accentuated as their circumstances mean they depend on them more than other groups. However, they also face other barriers to food security which are in some cases legally entrenched, and in others heightened by experience of systemic exclusion and discrimination. The reliance of people seeking asylum on food banks and other food projects to meet their basic needs echoes findings that the third sector is picking up significant slack around the needs of asylum seekers and the shortcomings of their support (Mayblin & James, 2017).

Geography and movement are key influences in the lives of people seeking asylum and this plays out on a daily basis. Location is a significant barrier as services are unequally distributed across Glasgow, and people seeking asylum do not have the means to address this as they have no control over where they live and very limited access to transport. This is a key issue that was highlighted in every session, however, this is not something that either food projects or asylum support organisations have the capacity to support with. Knowledge among practitioners of appropriate services available in other areas of the city is important to provide support, however staff and volunteers do not always have access to this information.

The Glasgow Free Food map has been very useful in this regard but limitations were acknowledged such as the significant work needed to keep it up to date. People seeking asylum travel extensively for food that is appropriate, and affordable or free, in order to maximise their low incomes and obtain food that is suitable for them. They might travel to get specific types of food, or to access particular food banks where a high quality of food is provided.

Combined with the mental stress of food insecurity, this movement can consume a lot of time and mental energy at the expense of other things, for example other areas of integration.

There is a clear need for improved access to transport and local solutions and less disparity in provision. Choice in food provision is of paramount importance to people seeking asylum, particularly as they have been denied choice in other areas of their lives and rely so heavily on this provision.

All food projects indicated that they offered choice to a greater or lesser degree. However, this contrasts with experiences of food bank users who felt that traditional food banks generally did not offer choice and that they could not express preferences around what they received, or refuse or request food. This disparity could be the result of a breakdown in communication or perhaps lack of awareness around cultural norms, particularly with regards to being the recipient of gifts or charity. Food providers should reflect on this and ensure choice is explicitly offered and space is made for service users to express their needs and preferences.

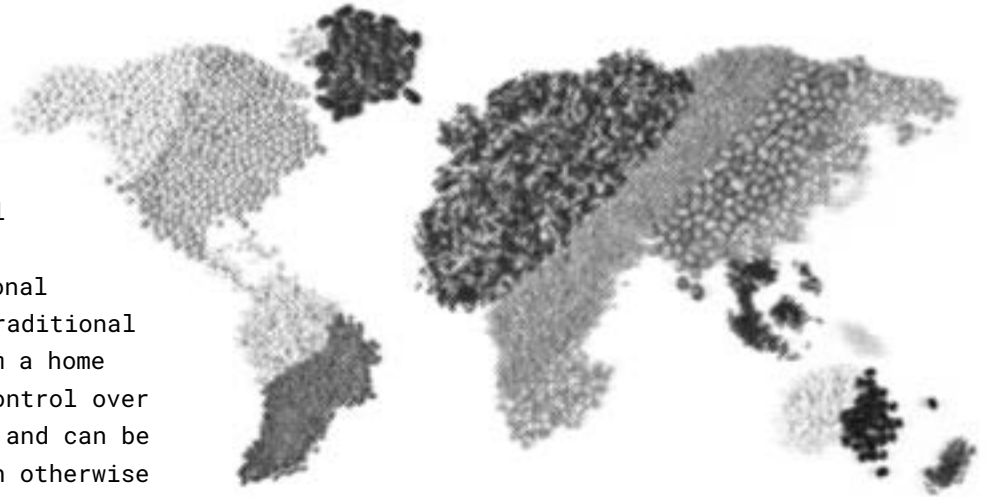


The use of supermarket vouchers was commended across the board - not only to provide choice, but also because it gave the users a sense of dignity and normality in using them. The emerging pantries were also praised in their unique model in offering choice to users. However, such options are only possible for organisations whose funding permits it. Many food projects rely in part or entirely on food surplus, which means that choice will always be limited.

Efforts to ensure that food is 'culturally appropriate' is rightly of great concern to food providers who are looking to meet the needs of diverse communities. However this term can obscure the multitude of reasons for which participants in discussions prefer to eat food associated with their own culture or that they are familiar with.

'Culturally appropriate' food could mean food that they were permitted to eat and felt comfortable eating, whether that be due to religious or cultural practices, or for health reasons. It may be for personal preferences for their own traditional food. Cooking from food from a home culture offers a sense of control over one's own identity and body and can be an empowering activity in an otherwise disempowering environment. Receiving food from a home country or culture could also be an act of recognition that makes people feel 'seen.' Food from home might also be preferred due to unfamiliarity with foods that are available in the Scottish diet and supermarkets. These different dimensions of 'cultural appropriateness' might be addressed in different ways within food provision.

Food projects want to offer a diverse range of foods that meet the needs of people seeking asylum. However, asylum seekers are clearly not a homogeneous group, so this can be a challenge. It is clear that an attitude that 'all are welcome' does not take into account specific needs and preferences of people seeking asylum. Food providers expressed that they did not always have the knowledge to provide for these groups and felt apprehensive. However, active listening and increased awareness of the needs of diverse cultures would go some way to addressing the needs. Many providers were glad of a forum where they could discuss these issues with other organisations - there is a need to build on this project with more of these spaces, with one participant enquiring about the possibility of setting up a network for advice for content for food parcels of different cultures and nationalities. However, food banks are not well placed to make changes that would better meet the needs of people seeking asylum in the current environment as they generally rely very heavily on donated food.



There was sometimes the impression that 'culturally specific' (such as African food banks) should cater for the needs of people seeking asylum. This presents a dilemma of either trying to increase diversity of provision within all food projects or increasing the capacity of 'culturally specific' food projects so they are able to cater for a larger community over a greater area.

Measures to address the root causes of food insecurity in the general population can often fall short when it comes to people seeking asylum as they are not able to access welfare support and are in other ways economically excluded. In this context, having 'diverse' food banks that cater to the needs of people seeking asylum are not the solution, but are necessary and vital. A lack of understanding and awareness of the specificities of the asylum system and experience means that many projects were poorly structured to meet their needs - emergency food provision is not a sufficient safeguard for people who live in "an ongoing emergency". Structural issues must be addressed, but as long as people seeking asylum are systemically economically marginalised, it is essential for food banks and projects to continue to exist and be supported, and have at their core a process of inclusion and listening to communities.

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APPENDIX

The Food Insecurity Experience Scale (endorsed by the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations)

During the last 12 months, was there a time when, because of lack of money or other resources:

- 01 You were worried you would not have enough food to eat?
- 02 You were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food?
- 03 You ate only a few kinds of foods?
- 04 You had to skip a meal?
- 05 You ate less than you thought you should?
- 06 Your household ran out of food?
- 07 You were hungry but did not eat?
- 08 You went without eating for a whole day?

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