

LIFE Food Insecurity Report March 2023

Objectives

To understand the lived experience of individuals accessing food provisions in York by exploring what interactions look like and feel like. Investigations were based around three main themes.

- 1) **Choice**
- 2) **Dignity**
- 3) **Reliance to self-sufficiency**

The broad scope of the project allowed us, to some extent, to capture wider themes, harvest ideas and identify barriers to access and opportunities that engaging with food provisions offer.

How did we do it?

Step 1 – Create surveys and identify other participatory research tools to support the research.

*To read the survey see Appendix 1.

Step 2 – Identify a diversity of provisions including statutory food banks and community-led food provisions in a variety of locations around York, representing different models of provision.

Step 3 – Reach out to those provisions and ask if they would like to get involved.

Step 4 – Identify and recruit a team of community reporters with direct experience of accessing food provisions to support the harvesting process.

Step 5 – Start doing the work.

Who have we reached?

Attendees engaged	56
Surveys completed	36
Conversations completed	20
Food Provisions attended	8
Food provisions connected with	9
New team members (including community reporters)	3
Food connections made (wider network)	~ 35
Tangible influence (other organisations outputs identified through engagement)	2
Reach outside of York	12
Hours of field research	187

*For details about the food provisions we connected with see Appendix 2.

1) **CHOICE Findings – What we can and cannot have.**

Finding 1 – The extent to which an individual had food choice (type and volume) depends upon the provision/s they attend and the ability to visit more than one provision.

Individuals need to have choice based on dietary requirements, religious/belief systems, how many people they are feeding and what they like to eat. The amount and choice of food available depends on the model (take whatever you need/food bags supplied) and the range of foods available at different provisions. Some individuals attend multiple provisions to get the food and other supplies such as toiletries and cleaning products that they need.

“I visit 3 places a week...you get a bag...but you don’t always get the stuff you need”.

“Coming about 2 years now, each one offers a variety of different things, sometimes its tins at one, another will be fresh goods, another supply cleaning material”.

“Works great for us, our dietary needs are different, we have halal meat...they have alternatives like fresh fruit and vegetables...we can choose what we have.”

Finding 2 – When asking people about choice, many individuals want to talk about whether attending food provisions was a choice or a necessity – almost all individuals said they had no choice.

Choice emerged in different contexts throughout our conversations. Choice of food depends on the food provision attended, how many food provisions individuals’ access, where the food provisions are, where individual live and how mobile they are. Almost all individuals said they had no choice but to attend food provisions to be able to feed themselves (and families if relevant) adequately.

“Seven months ago, I had an accident, unable to work, now with only one income coming in...foodbank has become a lifesaver”

“A lot of people coming in are working, but they simply cannot afford any more to feed, clothe, eat like they could before, they tell us!”

“People coming in by their own admission could afford to go to M&S but thought they were helping in reducing waste”

2) **DIGNITY Findings – How do I feel?**

Finding 1 – when individuals were asked how attending foodbanks makes them feel, there was a mix of responses and how they felt before and after attending changed.

Many people feel ashamed, embarrassment, afraid, guilty, and humiliated when attending food provisions. Anger emerged when choice to attend is taken away, that it should not be the case. Fewer attendees feel that it is their right to access provisions in order to meet a need. For some, feelings shifted from negative to positive after they attended.

“Personally, I don’t have a problem, I have a need...I try to fulfil that need...but for some, there’s social stigma involved.”

“Stigma, labelled, that was me to start with.”

“Angry, that although I I’m working and budgeting, costs increase restrict my ability to buy sufficient food.”

Finding 2 – How individuals feel about attending depends on how they are treated at the food provision and for some, if they are helping others in the process.

Individuals that are greeted warmly, respectfully, given freedom, choice and are not asked many questions feel better (less ashamed) about attending food provisions. A number of people support others (family, friends) by attending which changes the sense of their own value for the better.

“It’s not all just take, it’s nice to be able to give back.”

“They’re really great, they treat me with respect.”

“I feel better by providing for my children.”

3) **RELIANCE TO SELF SUFFICIENCY findings – How do I do that, do I want to do that?**

Finding 1 – The majority of individuals would like to be self-sufficient but find it difficult to see how that could happen without an increase in the amount of money that they receive.

Without a change in employment status for individuals that want to work, or an increase in benefits for individuals that cannot or choose not to work, most people cannot foresee a time when they do not need to access foodbanks. Regardless of employment status, most people feel that the increase in the cost of living is the main reason why they have to attend food banks.

“Benefits uplift is the only thing that will help but with everything else going up it won’t help.”

"Once I get back to work...probably won't need to use the foodbank."

"The whole gas electricity thing, is a back story to everyone."

Finding 2 - Many individuals express a connection with food provisions that means more than food and do not want to stop attending even if financial circumstances change.

Most people associate self-sufficiency with not attending food provisions anymore. Through attending, people make friends, feel less lonely, learn about other provisions and support in York (informally and formally), socialise and laugh, they do not want to lose these wider benefits.

"No, as I've made friends and helped me not feel lonely, so even if I didn't need to go for food I would go for the company."

"Coming along allows me to say to others...have you heard about this, that, and response is often, no I didn't but I do now."

"Ideally, but I've made some good friends!"

It's not all about food!

By taking part in this research, it has become very clear that food provisions provide people with more than food and the reasons that people attend are down to more than food. Food provisions benefit people with strong social connections, a sense of community, opportunities for empowerment and fulfil environmental and sustainability goals for many.

Finding - Food provisions can centre community, connect and network.

"It's a good community vibe, all local people, all people know each other, staff are really good here."

"They always go above and beyond, it's not just about food."

"Might be the only people I talk to, that's the really fundamental thing for me, social connection."

"Our cooking club works, my slow cooker...last night I did sag aloo, Saturday was hotpot."

"I have used yellow stickers, that's where I meet others and I've invited them to come along to the foodbank."

Finding - Food provisions can provide people with opportunities for fulfilment and pathways to change.

"Used to feel embarrassed, but I don't now as I volunteer and help out which helps me!"

"I've got to know the people that run it, become a volunteer and help 3 to 4 times a week. My son sometimes comes down to help too."

"This guy comes down, he's really into cooking...that passion is helping him stay off drugs...the foodbanks been a massive help in his way to live better."

"We've got locals that come...you just get to know their life stories...it's really heart-warming to hear how some people have turned their lives around."

Finding - The environmental impact and fundamental injustice of food waste are reasons why some people attend food provisions. Reusing, recycling and sustainability goals are motives for attending and remits for some providers.

"But I also think it's good to lessen waste."

"Stopping food going into the waste stream, that'd end up in the tip...which is a cost to society."

"It cuts down on food waste going to landfill, waste that'd years to compost and disposed of so we're helping out in our way."

"It helps food waste enormously..this is the way forward."

It's part of how we set up...originally just to eliminate food supermarket waste...that was our remit...some people still come for that reason alone"

*See Appendix 3 for more detailed case studies.

What have we learned from the people we have spoken to?

- That people who access food provisions know more than us, let them guide the conversation.
- The less formal the provision is, the easier it is to connect.
- Trust is a key lever; it is better that people who are part of the community have the conversations.
- Get to know provider as well as the attendees (help out if you can).
- Less questions and more listening works well.
- People are interested in hearing about the food landscape in York and how to do things differently.
- There is a lot of energy for change from everybody involved!

Some additional findings from us

- The most successful provisions are the community based / run ones.
- Other successful provisions have multi agency service attend on their terms, and other local community support.
- Access should be open and free.
- The more discrete the signage for food provisions the better.
- Queue conversations create signposting opportunities and a may present mechanisms to self-supporting.
- Personal choice is really important, no gatekeeping.
- The less process driven and authoritative the space is, the better the atmosphere.
- People are naturally fair and compassionate, generous, and like to share.
- People that support the provisions understand people and are non-judgemental.
- Statutory works well if it presents as not too official and offers a multiagency presence as long as there's no labels, for example Alice, not Alice the Local Area Coordinator.

Moving forward – some recommendations based on the learnings from people we have spoken to

- Monopolise the energy created by the work, lead with the momentum created, create spaces where conversations about food provisions can continue and build.
- Lead from the community, they are better at knowing what is needed and how to do it.
- Place based models and networks. The sense of community and individual empowerment is tangible, each place is unique with unique connections, let's do more of this.
- Find more physical community spaces, this is core!
- Investigate financially sustainable models.
- Does food provision need to be the headline, can we make it about community, socialising, recycling, sustainability, eating together and having fun?
- A central distribution hub for food, distributed with consensus across all provision, some have too much, others not enough.
- Think about terminology, the term food bank can download feelings of shame and the words can become a barrier to access, perhaps it's time to rethink what language we use.
- Build local neighbourhoods using the momentum created from food provisions, as sometimes, they are the only place/space around.
- Keep challenging the social determinants.

“Gradually people will say this is the way we live now.”

“We're all aware we're now doing something quite different..the context is different now.”

Appendix 1 – Survey Questions

These are some of the questions we asked individuals when we connected at food bank provisions. We also conducted longer, audio conversations alongside the surveys.

LIFE – Food Insecurity – Short survey

We are part of a network called LIFE, working with Skyblue Research. We would like to talk to people who are involved with food provisions/banks in York. We would like to find out why people use food provisions (banks), what you think of them, how it makes you feel and listen to your ideas about what would work better for you.

We want to inform change. Your voices are critical to this process, you are the ones holding the knowledge. We need to hear from you so we can really start to help shape change around food provisions here in York.

Food Provision Location:.....

Date:.....

Choice

Why do you come to the food provision?

How often do you come to the food provision?

Do you go to any other food provisions?

What is it that you like about this provision?

What might work better for you here?

Dignity

How does attending this food provision make you feel?

What changes could be made to make you feel better when attending?

Change

Would you like to stop attending food provisions?

What would have to change for you to make that happen?

Appendix 2 – Food Provisions connections

I am Reusable - I am reusable is a community food bank located in the Leeman Road area. It leads with sustainability and not just a food provision and as such intercepts waste food, recycles clothes, donations and reuses items. Everyone is welcome at the food bank; criteria is not applied.

St Deny's – Located in Walmgate, a cheerful and friendly church community providing food, support and connection for people across the city.

Collective Sharehouse – Located off Nunthorpe Road. It provides support for residents primarily for the Micklegate ward. They offer a range of non-perishable food items, robust fruit and vegetables, toiletries, and household cleaning products alongside a range of various support services such as access to a local councillor and local area co-ordinators.

Luke's Larder – Located off Burton Stone Lane, it is a food sharing scheme open to all and benefiting from donations from local supermarkets, for food otherwise headed for landfill.

Bell Farm Social Hall – Located in Heworth, it offers a food bank access six days a week. It is a real community, social and connecting space for support.

SPARK food bank – Located in the city centre, it is an independent food bank and zero waste supermarket providing groceries and art supplies for the local community.

Haxby Food Share project – Located at the Memorial Hall, it distributes food to help people, which is gifted by the community, local shops, businesses, and other food collection services.

Carecent – Located in the city centre, it is a breakfast centre for all homeless, unemployed, or otherwise socially excluded members of the community. They provide food, clothing and fellowship in a friendly and non-judgemental environment, volunteer staff are always available to listen and advise. They offer services and work with other agencies in the afternoons.

Appendix 3 – Case Studies

Meet Dave.....

Dave was homeless and living in a tent by the river. He managed to secure his own flat, currently has very little in it and he goes to 2 or 3 food provisions across a week. He has been given a slow cooker and has food to cook now. He says that he can get by, and he tries to be as healthy as he can.

The connections he has made at food provisions is really important to him because he is able to chat and socialise again, build confidence. Dave recognises that he is not at a place to work but that is his next level. Dave says that accessing food and all the unseen benefits has enabled him to start to live the life he wants to live again and has been a catalyst towards gaining employment. He knows he can't do everything all at once, learning how to budget, living skills, the food provision has been a big part of a support network to help him with all this. He gets to chat to different people, and he enjoys helping out with provisions where he can.

"I came in accessing it but now I use it as a social connection."

Meet Kate (one of our community reporters)

Kate attends and volunteers at I am Reusable. Kate volunteers a lot of her time to facilitate the food bank and has intimate knowledge of the foodbank landscape in York. When approached about being a community reporter for the projects Kate said yes and now, she is an established and trusted member of the team. It was obvious that Kate would be a key asset and vital connector for the project and luckily for us she agreed to help!

Kate says that she has been speaking to lots of locals in the community, from youngsters to old aged pensioners. She has got to know people more, developed friendships and has been able to support people better as a result, for example, knowing what food people need and making sure that they get that food.

"It's a vicious cycle, trying to get yourself out."

"People feel more comfortable to come and speak to me."

"Felt really good to be involved."

Further information

This research has been undertaken and directed by the LIFE Group.



Supporters of the project have included North Yorkshire Council, City of York Council and Skyblue Research Ltd (York) as part of a wider ambition to understand and address food insecurity in York and North Yorkshire.

More information about the project can be found at www.skyblue.org.uk/foodinsecurity