

# Key Messages



## Challenge Poverty Week: Food Insecurity, Poverty and Health

7<sup>th</sup> October 2020

### Introduction

1. This was a collaborative event presented by VHS and the Poverty Alliance, to raise awareness of food insecurity, poverty and health during this year's Challenge Poverty Week and in light of COVID-19. There were opening presentations from Neil Cowan, Policy Officer at the Poverty Alliance, and Kiren Zubairi, VHS's Policy Engagement Officer. 21 people from the third and public sectors participated, including community and lived experience voices from Kilmarnock and Ferguslie Park in Paisley. This paper summarises the key messages shared and discussed at the event.

### COVID-19 has become a poverty and human rights crisis

2. The lockdown and social distancing measures have entrenched inequalities in a number of specific but linked areas: food insecurity, mental health, loneliness and social isolation, poverty and income insecurity.
3. Existing inequalities have been foregrounded by the pandemic – for example, for homeless people.
4. The grip of poverty has tightened for those who were already experiencing it and extended poverty to new people. 1 in 4 children were already in poverty before the pandemic. Half a million people in Scotland depend on Universal Credit.
5. At a community level people in some communities also have to contend with other social issues on top of food insecurity, such as crime, drug abuse or poorer access to education, which may combine to impact adversely on people's health.
6. People who were already experiencing in-work poverty (e.g. working in the gig economy) have had their incomes cut further, either by being moved to furlough (a 20% wage cut), losing their jobs and/or having to depend on Universal Credit.

7. People who were furloughed hadn't previously been in the free school meals income bracket and suddenly found themselves struggling to feed their children, with no government help for this.
8. People with long term conditions, women, people from black and ethnic minority communities and people with no recourse to public funds have been rendered even more vulnerable to poverty by the pandemic.
9. The pandemic's pivoting of services to digital provision has been a drain on poor people's available resources for food: e.g. having to home school children is a costly challenge for people who lack appropriate digital devices, wifi or adequate band width or who have more than one child needing access to a device.
10. In Fife there was already food poverty but it was in pockets spread across the region – these spread significantly with the advent of the pandemic.

### **Food insecurity is one symptom of the inequalities crisis**

11. Food insecurity and the level of recourse to food banks was already a grave concern prior to COVID-19.
12. Food banks have seen up to a 30% rise in demand since the onset of the pandemic.
13. The cause has been too much poverty and people's income crises, not too little food being available.
14. There have been food access issues for people who did not previously experience food insecurity, highlighted publicly most recently in relation to students having to socially isolate in halls of residence.
15. Access to fresh, healthy food has been an issue, as has access to culturally and dietary appropriate foods.
16. Some people may have stockpiled food during the lockdown, but others were (and are) unable to store adequate amounts of food due to lack of storage space or fridges/freezers in their homes/accommodation.
17. For a minority of people the pandemic actually improved their access to nutritious food: the charity Rowan Alba's works with extremely vulnerable people, many of whom wouldn't normally enjoy a hot meal but who benefitted from the deliveries of hot food during the lockdown
18. Disabled people who were shielding and used to regular online supermarket shopping reported they lost their online shopping delivery slots during the lockdown.
19. Support for shielding groups stopped overnight once the requirement to shield ended, and now people are really worried about how they will get through another lockdown.

### **Community and third sector solutions**

20. Welcome innovations such as food larders and food fridges but recognise these are no substitute for creating secure, adequate incomes.

21. Recognise the role of communities like Ferguslie Park in Paisley, third sector and grassroots organisations in helping to meet people's basic needs but need to invest in them properly to ensure sustainability.
22. Noted the good work taking place in Kilmarnock including the delivery of food parcels by the COVID-19 community resilience team and volunteer drivers to collect prescriptions.
23. Collaboration at a community level is key but must not be a fig leaf for government to hide behind.
24. Some people are missing out on support that they really needed and valued, as volunteers have returned to work.
25. Social care and support provider Carr Gomm supported people by helping with shopping and access to IT and by helping people get small grants for essentials including data and food. Significant loneliness, social isolation and vulnerability was experienced by their clients.
26. Fife TSI already had a network on food poverty, and during the lockdown partnered with the local authority to set up Helping Hands in Fife which took 5,000 calls for help.

### **Policy solutions**

27. Address Universal Credit issues that are key drivers of food insecurity. Tackle the inadequate level of UC: make permanent the temporary £20 increase in the standard allowance (introduced to mitigate the impact of the pandemic). End the 5 week wait. Remove the two child policy rule.
28. Acknowledge that the Scottish Government's roll-out in 2021 of its new Social Security powers will provide a lifeline for many people.
29. Acknowledge the importance of MSP Elaine Smith's Good Food Nation Bill.
30. VHS is working with Public Health Scotland to consider the evidence and learn the lessons of food insecurity caused by the pandemic and to develop a long term framework for local and national government designed to be preventative of food insecurity going forward.
31. In Fife bureaucracy was minimised/swept away during the lockdown to enable the mobilisation of emergency help to ensure people had food and other essentials. Now that the lockdown has ended bureaucracy and rules are already coming back in. We need to learn lessons and retain the ability to get on and act.
32. RNIB Scotland is campaigning for supermarkets to be more responsive to visually impaired people's needs whilst shopping - e.g. cannot see one way routes or social distancing circles marked out on the floors. This has led to some blind people being told off by staff/other customers in stores. Socially distancing with a guide dog is also extremely difficult. Pre-pandemic supermarkets would offer assistance to blind people whilst in store, but this stopped with the pandemic.
33. Participatory budgeting at a local level should be rolled out more extensively.
34. Cost of and access to public transport needs to be looked at as this impacts on poor people's access to food.

35. Are we too precious about data protection and our data systems? Better data sharing would help ensure we identify the most vulnerable/in need.
36. Address the stigma of food insecurity and the associated issues of poverty and social exclusion.



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