

The Future of Food Symposium 2023: Examining food as a vehicle for societal change

Summary report



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Acknowledgements

The Future of Food Symposium 2023: Examining food as a vehicle for societal change was held on the 24th and 25th of May 2023 at the Coventry University Technology Centre conference suite. The follow up online autumn event was held on the 1st of November. Thanks are due to the many people who made the symposium possible.

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Foreword

by Jade Bashford, Programme Co-ordinator at
The Real Farming Trust



Since the last Future of Food Symposium in 2021, inequality and extreme poverty in the UK have increased and with it the need for nutritional support for increasing numbers of people. Large numbers of people are experiencing chronic rather than emergency nutrition insecurity alongside other harms caused by extreme poverty, including damage to confidence, mental health and social isolation. In the absence of adequate policy support and diminished public services, community groups and networks are developing support for local people.

The 2023 Future of Food Symposium examined the demand, practice and impact of community nutrition provision, amongst other topics. The event highlighted the important research that was undertaken as part of The Real Farming Trust's partnership project, Ready Healthy Eat, as well as research with FareShare Midlands and community food organisations across Nottinghamshire.

An effective community response to nutrition requires collaborations and simultaneous interventions and expertise from different perspectives including policy, community inclusion and planning, effective surplus food supply chains, community based nutrition skills, income generation and well targeted funding, partnership building and data based decision making. An effective response requires both academic knowledge and well planned and kind practical responses in communities.

Over two days, this Symposium brought together academics, the voluntary sector, grassroots movements and community members. It was bold in bringing together different stakeholders to present and learn from different kinds of expertise. In particular, the testimony of speakers with personal experience of food poverty made striking contributions that raised the level of discussion and debate.

The event found that well run collaborative third sector organisations, partnerships and networks that are embedded in communities of need and have long term secure funding can provide very powerful responses both to nutritional needs and to social and mental health needs, which in turn enable further action and development. Good third sector responses meet and understand the whole person in the context of their lives, warmly, kindly and respectfully. They operate nimbly and flexibly, often provide remarkable value for money in terms of impact and sometimes far exceed their targets because of their genuine motivation for community benefit. The event showed how we might increase the capacity in the third sector and began to illuminate some of the context and systems that they operate in.

This report gives a summary of the key themes, keynote speakers, panel events and conclusions.

We are grateful to Jordon Lazell and the team at Coventry University for organising an interesting and impactful event.

Symposium context

Rising levels of hunger across the UK has placed millions of households in precarious, food insecure positions. Families are facing tough choices between heating, eating and travel, amongst a number of other demands, all rising in cost. At the same time, community organisations have effectively responded to support vulnerable groups, meeting the demand for emergency food provision and utilising food as a vehicle for social good to enhance people's lives in their local community. However, often the importance of these organisations is over-looked. Described as the 'fourth emergency service', this is a sector helping millions but having to negotiate considerable challenges to sustain its longevity.

The 2023 Future of Food Symposium focused on the food insecure position of households across the UK and the organisations supporting them. From food provisioning services to the capturing and distribution of surpluses, to the guidance and help offered to improve food knowledge and nutrition, and the work of those offering alternative means of producing and accessing food, this event provided a space to share, reflect and progress in moving towards a more sustainable food system for all. The event recognised that food is an important medium through which the life prospects of the most vulnerable groups in society can be furthered. The organisations at the centre of this work are not only alleviating food insecurity but also provide training and social experiences as well as encourage and showcase more sustainable community food practices.

Following the success of the previous Future of Food Symposium events (the 2019 symposium in Nottingham and the 2021 symposium held online) the 2023 iteration was held at the Coventry conference centre on the 24th and 25th of May 2023. The event was collaboratively organised by the University of Essex Business School, Centre for Business in Society and Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University, as well as the Real Farming Trust, and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Participants of this event learnt and debated a number of cross-cutting themes linked to combatting food poverty. The event provided practitioners with a space to reflect on issues such as the need to address nutritional deficiencies; the high expense of fresh, healthy food; the low quality, compromised nature and short shelf life of food donations, and the overall right for vulnerable people to have fair access to affordable food, amongst other issues.

A range of stakeholders across the charitable food sector attended the event, as well as community members, academics and representatives from leading retailers and national food campaigning organisations. 65 people in total engaged over the 2 day event.

A follow up autumn online event was held on the 1st of November. Two sessions hosted by Dr. Lopa Saxena and Dr. Jordon Lazell explored rights based approaches to food and the role of resilience within charitable food supply chains. This event provided a valuable catchup point for many attendees as well as bringing the symposium to a wider audience. The 2024 Future of Food Symposium was also announced.

This report gives a summary of the key themes, keynote presentations, themed sessions, panel debates and the breakout group exercises.

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Keynote speakers

The 2023 Future of Food Symposium aimed to place the views of community members at the forefront of the programme. The first keynote speech, consisting of several community members, gave lived experience reflections of food insecurity, and being supported by community organisations. These are voices that are not normally heard and featured speakers from diverse backgrounds.

This session was opened by Jade Bashford, Programme Co-ordinator at The Real Farming Trust. She emphasised the importance of sharing lived experience at the symposium and how such voices are of equal importance to others, i.e the practitioners and academics in attendance. Jade explained how often the voices of those that have experienced food insecurity are often overlooked. The following highlights some key points raised. Names have been changed to respect the privacy of the community members that were happy to share their stories.

Community experience keynote speakers

Kayleigh – Supported by Stroud Food Hub, Gloucestershire

Kayleigh gave an emotive account of her journey to using a food bank. Kayleigh explained that as a result of a number of different forces, her life quickly unravelled. She was a single mum to four children (aged between 5 and 13) running a successful childminding business in 2019. Her work provided a comfortable life for the family and fit around the demands of motherhood. However, after having to close her business with no option to re-open, and her eldest son suffering a mental health crisis, the effects of the pandemic presented Kayleigh considerable challenges in earning a sufficient income.

At the time, she considered herself one of the lucky ones. She had some savings and an ex-partner providing some financial support. However, this was not sufficient in the long term given the limited employment opportunities during 2020 as a result of the pandemic. At the same time, she was dealing with the challenge of waiting for assessments and trying to protect her son, and dealing with the ongoing isolation of the pandemic. For the first time in her life, Kayleigh was forced to turn to the benefit system.

“The kids' ever-present mantra “what's for tea” became stomach-sinking, soul-sucking panic of how to cobble something together”

Kayleigh spoke about having to cut out all non-essentials, trying to support a family with food and everything else required on £400 a month. Her life was one controlled by budgeting and spreadsheets. Her money could not extend to herbs and spices that could have made basic meals more exciting. Additional costs of issues with the car and a broken washing machine added to stress, as well as the calls from her kids of “what’s for tea”. She told us about the slide towards more processed foods and ready meals. She could purchase a pizza and a garlic bread for less than £1 that would keep the kids quiet for a bit.

Alongside this, Kayleigh was dealing with being a single parent and the constant threats of benefit sanctions. With the £20 uplift removed, her available monthly income went from £400 to £320 for a family of five. This further impacted her mental health, and her cognitive function became compromised.

“it's exhausting being poor”

Kayleigh’s speech about her feelings of constant shame and fear, and how she hid her situation and how this was totally and utterly exhausting was powerful. She directly addressed how people in this situation are steeped in trauma and anxiety, embarrassment and discomfort. There were tears from more than one person in the audience at the symposium.

Kayleigh drew her speech to a close by highlighting the often invisible nature of being food insecure and the wider food poverty challenges that people are facing. She discussed being rightfully angry at the persistence of poverty in the UK and the lack of financial support for people suffering. The continued erosion of public services and reduction of grants for supportive services have severely limited the available support.

"It is embarrassing and degrading to have to admit that you haven't been able to provide for your family. It is not a conversation that I would ever be comfortable with, but it is exactly that sense of embarrassment and discomfort that effectively silences the millions suffering"

She discussed how food banks, and the volunteers that give up time to run them, are holding up the country. Overall her speech was a powerful start to the symposium and a wake up call for many of the severity of the topics that were to be tackled over the next two days.

Kayleigh's speech in full can be read in the appendix.

Rosie – Supported by the NOW Group, Belfast

Rosie was supported by the NOW Group, an organisation that works with people with learning difficulties and autism to improve their lives, providing training and learning experiences, and also helping to find and prepare beneficiaries for employment opportunities.

Admitting to being a bit nervous, Rosie spoke about completing her placement at the NOW group where she learnt key skills in food preparation and service. She spoke about how Ann, one of the teachers, was fantastic and was very supportive during the placement.

Rosie spoke about how she now has a revived interest in baking and whilst she did experience struggles on the way, the work of the NOW group meant she had so much fun trying. The support of the NOW group increased her confidence in food preparation and cooking. She really enjoyed learning about how to put together healthy and nutritious meals.

"Being disabled I am very nervous about food preparation and cooking"

Rosie spoke about how she learnt so much valuable information such as the importance of food hygiene practices, like using different colour chopping boards for different food, and about allergies and the dangers of cross contamination.

Rosie discussed how she lost trust during Covid and how she became afraid of people because of the constant negative messaging in the media. Shopping for food became a terrifying experience and she worried about reacting in the correct way in public because of her autism.

Working with the NOW Group helped overcome these experiences and helped Rosie talk about how she now has greater enjoyment in food and cooking.



Harry – Volunteer for Feeding Coventry

Harry spoke about his work and volunteering experience with Feeding Coventry at Foleshill Community Centre. Harry has been involved for more than two years and spoke about how, after being made redundant in 2019 this led him to engage in the project. Harry explained that he had previous experience of food outreach projects for many years as a result of previous struggles.

The work undertaken by the Foleshill Community Centre is very unique as the beneficiaries are from a diverse background, such as Syria, Romania, Afghanistan, Jamaica, and across Africa as well as other places. Harry described the importance of considering the traumas that beneficiaries have experienced and how the organisation can provide forms of food that are recognisable.



Harry also mentioned educating beneficiaries with what are healthy foods that are good for not just the body, but the mind and the soul also. He spoke about recent work helping care homes in the local community. For example opening the minds of people that are often shut inside through the vehicle of food. This involved offering eating experiences and bringing people from different care homes together to have a collective meal.

He also undertakes work engaging young people in gardening, educating them about growing and looking after plants. This also involved greater awareness of the importance of fruit and vegetables, with young people learning the joy of eating food that you have grown yourself.

Harry also mentioned a host of other activities, food and non-food related. Overall, he emphasised the importance of people engaging in some form in the community space, rather than this being seen as a place to receive food and leave. He described this as a journey that people go through, a process of learning how to successfully engage, gain understanding and knowledge around food, and achieve a host of benefits through community engagement around food.

“My volunteering experience exposed me to skills I never knew that I had, it has been great for my life experience. I enjoy helping and supporting people and it has been brilliant for my mindset of how to do things. I have learnt the same approach does not always work for everyone”

Academic keynote speaker

Dr. Clare Pettinger, Associate Professor in Public Health Dietetics, University of Plymouth



Clare Pettinger is a registered dietitian, public health nutritionist and experienced educator at the University of Plymouth. She is actively engaged in creative community research around food systems, poverty and social justice. She believes strongly that innovative collaborative approaches are required to tackle local (and global) health, social and planetary well-being challenges.

Her current research is co-leading a 5-year consortium food systems project 'FoodSEqual: Co-production of healthy, sustainable food systems for disadvantaged communities' (led by University of Reading, funded £6m by UKRI Strategic Priorities fund) which aims for more equity in access to and affordability of healthy and sustainable diets across socio-economic levels. The project uses creative methods to empower and engage communities, giving them a voice to share their food stories, addressing issues of power to enhance wellbeing and inform social justice discourse.

At the symposium, Clare presented 'Engaging with (less affluent) communities who are left behind by the traditional UK food system' which explored the findings from the 'FoodSEqual' Project.

Clare began by giving a context of our food system and its many problems. From the precarity and fragility of our food system, to unfair access, food insecurity, poor diets and health outcomes, and food inequality and inequity, our food system is in many ways broken.

Clare proposes that creative and community approaches are an important part of finding solutions. This means getting communities more involved in decision making and overcoming the elite and often exclusionary practices currently presenting in policy making and research. Rather, a progressive and transformative 'co-production' model that is more transparent and takes an inclusive approach to power is needed. Clare explained how such an approach is needed for a resilient UK food system.

Clare shared her experience of engaging in practices of participatory action research and how the process of reflexivity and ethics of participation are critical for undertaking research in this space. Also, noting the role of power relations, the emotion in such research practices as well as the considerable time and resources needed to employ such methods.



Moving to the FoodSEqual project, Clare explained that this relates to the co-production of healthy, sustainable food systems for disadvantaged communities. The project's vision was 'to provide citizens of socio-culturally diverse disadvantaged communities with choice and agency over the food they consume'. This was to be achieved through co-developing new productions, supply chains and policy frameworks to deliver affordable, attractive, and healthy and sustainable diets.

A key part of Clare's project was to train and put in place 'community food researchers'. These were practitioners on the ground that received research skills training to collect data and write up findings, directly embedding the community voice into the project's work. Clare shared quotes showing that these researchers learnt a significant amount and a new motivation to be involved in food projects locally.

Clare also described a comparative shopping basket activity where, with community groups, habituated food habits were shared as well as practices that were aspirations for change, such as better access to good quality, and affordable fruit and vegetables, better portioning of fruit and vegetables, increased food variety and being able to purchase food with less packaging.

Shopping basket: Key findings

Workshops: n=5
Participants: n=31
Mean age: 61y

Top Priority: Food Access

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affordability of processed meat Fish is popular (tinned, fresh, frozen) Good quality, affordable fruit and veg Usable quantities of fruit and veg Wider variety of local fish Desire less packaging 	<div style="background-color: #4CAF50; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; border-radius: 5px;">Habits</div> <div style="background-color: #4CAF50; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center; border-radius: 5px; margin-top: 10px;">Aspirations for change</div>
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Clare also explained the final part of the data collection of the FoodSEqual project which were collaborative analysis workshops. Focusing on fish specifically, the community food researcher were directly involved in the analysis of the project data. This led to the emergence of several concepts and the development of infographics that specifically address improving access to healthy, affordable and sustainable food.

FoodSEqual

Food Systems Equality

What is FoodSEqual about?
Improving access to healthy, affordable and sustainable food by putting communities at the heart of the project.

Why are we talking about fish?
In collaboration with the community, fish has been identified as a food for possible development. We ran 4 interactive workshops to find out if Plymouth wants or needs a new product, supply chain, or policy around fish.

What did we find?

1 **Fishing quotas**
Could we change the rules around fishing quotas to reduce waste and improve access?

2 **Marketing**
Could we use marketing to –
• change perceptions of tinned fish?
• make fish 'cool', 'trendy' and appealing for children and adults?

3 **Tasting opportunities**
Could we start up tasting opportunities, cooking classes etc. so people can try before they buy?

4 **Innovate supply chain**
Could we improve supply chain to give people –
• better access to fresh fish?
• more variety of fish when eating outside the home?

5 **Tinning plant**
Could we co-design and build a tinning plant in Plymouth to reduce waste and increase access?

6 **Close the gap**
Could we find a way to increase dialogue between communities and decision makers?

A focus on two research projects

Two research projects in particular were showcased at the 2023 symposium. Both of these pieces of work emphasised the theme of the conference and unearthed important findings around the work of community organisations in tackling food poverty. The following gives further information.

Ready Healthy Eat

The Ready Healthy Eat project brought together four established local community food organisations across the UK to provide healthy and nutritional ready-to-eat meals for those experiencing food insecurity and poverty in their respective communities.

It was a collaborative three-year programme delivered from February 2020 to February 2023, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and coordinated by the Real Farming Trust.

The partner community organisations were Brighton & Hove Food Partnership (Brighton, England), Cyrenians (Edinburgh, Scotland), The Hornbeam Centre (London, England), and NOW Group (Belfast, Northern Ireland).

The Ready Healthy Eat project's primary objective was to improve the nutritional quality of ready-to-eat meals provided in food poverty projects. It funded activities run by the four partner organisations that could lead to changing unhealthy diets disproportionately accessed by vulnerable groups in their communities. The aim was to show that community organisations can produce cost-effective and nutritious meals to break the cycle of fast unhealthy food dependence by disadvantaged families. The activities included: training programmes focused on cooking, health, and nutrition; procurement and (re)distribution of local and/or surplus food; preparation and delivery of ready meals; and facilitating spaces of food consumption (e.g., community cafes, social eating).

A research team from the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR), and the Centre for Business in Society (CBiS) at Coventry University led the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) of the Ready Healthy Eat programme.

In the final year of the programme, they also carried out in parallel a reflective evaluation of the programme with the four partner organisations and peers in the community food provisioning sector. This process enabled them to reflect collectively on the broader impacts of the Ready Healthy Eat programme as well as the key learnings (including successes and challenges) that had emerged.

A link to the final report can be found here: [Ready Healthy Eat: The Social Impact of Ready Healthy Eat Programme 2020-2023](#)

**READY
HEALTHY
EAT**



Supporting Frontline Community-Based Organisations in the Fight Against Hunger in the East Midlands

This project focused on the role that the community food sector plays for people facing adversity, providing not just an emergency food service, but also a lifeline of social contact and food services. Also, this project sought to explore the relationship between this sector and the surplus food distribution organisation FareShare. Specifically, this study examined how and why the model of 'social eating' emerged in the East Midlands and how this has been mobilised by community food services, which were provisioned with food via the surplus food service provided by FareShare Midlands. This work shines a light on the incredible efforts of stakeholders that ensure the citizens of the East Midlands region have access to safe and affordable food, and to the vital social connection that also sustains people.

The report of the findings firstly outlines the factors that enabled community food services to meet the greatly expanded demand during the pandemic. Secondly, the factors that enabled community food organisations to deliver key activities, such as 'social eating' events, and how this was facilitated by their networks.

This work also comments on the factors that constrained the community food sector from delivering key activities. Recommendations to improve the service of the community food sector are also offered.

A link to the final report can be found here: [Supporting Frontline Community-Based Organisations in the fight against Hunger in the East Midlands](#)



Themed sessions

The symposium featured six themed sessions with several presentations in each. The following gives the titles, abstracts and the name and organisation of each speaker.

Ensuring equitable food access: From everyday groceries to planning for the next emergency - Co-operating with communities: Principles and partnerships in action

Session description:

Access to healthy and affordable food is not equitable across income groups and location in the UK. This themed session shares work being undertaken by food advocacy organisations and businesses in order to overcome barriers to ensuring greater quality in access to food. The session considers how the post-pandemic environment has influenced consumers' food access. Looking forward, there is a need to consider how to mitigate future food system shocks and also what pathways towards more sustainable and dignified food solutions look like.

'Preparing for the next Lockdown: How can grassroots food-aid projects contribute to essential preparation for the next crisis'
Louise Delmege, Bristol Food Service/ National Food Service Bristol

'Fairer access to food in community: A long journey, together'
Ed Powell, Food Mission Manager, The Co-op

'Food equality at the NOW Group'
Pauline Fitzsimons, Director of Operations in Northern Ireland, The NOW Group

A sustainable and dignified food solution for those in food poverty'
Alicia Weston, Bags of Taste



Innovation in Surplus Food Services

Session description:

Organisations that capture, store, redistribute and utilise surplus food are currently more important than ever. This surplus food donated by the retail and manufacturing sector has provided a lifeline to community organisations in the form of a source of low-cost food. This themed session gives further insight from leaders in this space on the innovative practices formed during this sector's recent transformation and expansion within the COVID and post COVID environment

'FareShare Midlands Community Meals. Pilot, Learnings, Service'
Pierce O'Connor, Projects and Programmes Manager, FareShare Midlands

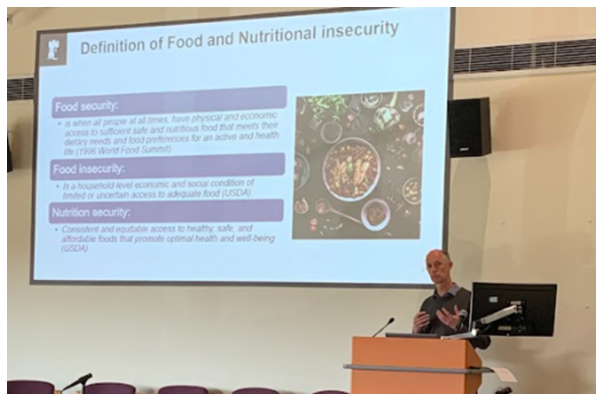
'Enhancing efficiency through technology on The Felix Project's Green Scheme Model'
Georgie Czernobay, Green Scheme Manager, The Felix Project

'Reflective learning points on surplus food from Ready Healthy Eat Project Partners'
Jordon Lazell, Lecturer in Marketing, Essex Business School, University of Essex

Nutrition and Nutritional Insecurity

Session description:

Now more than ever community organisations are playing a crucial role in improving the diets and food knowledge of food insecure households. This themed session takes a further look at the health outcomes of those experiencing food insecurity and how this relates to nutrition. Through presenting innovative research, comments will be made on the impact of the pandemic and cost of living crisis that has seen implications for both the type and quality of food being eaten by those experiencing food poverty, as well as the quantity.



'How does reliance on universal credit impact food and nutritional security?'

Simon Welham, Assistant Professor in Nutritional Science, School of Biosciences, University of Nottingham

'Detailed assessment of population food security in a region of high deprivation'

Michelle Thomas, Research Assistant, School of Biosciences, University of Nottingham

'Practical advice & considerations for improving the diets of food insecure households who access community food support'

Fran Taylor, AfN Registered Public Health Nutritionist and Vic Borrill, Director of Brighton & Hove Food Partnership



'Nutrition in community food projects - findings from the Ready Healthy Eat project'

Lopa Saxena, Assistant Professor, Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University

'Neodemographic approaches to food and nutrition security'

John Harvey, Associate Professor, Nottingham Business School, University of Nottingham



What makes an effective surplus food network?

Session description:

Surplus food networks are often arranged and operate in an organic, sometimes informal manner, bringing together food producers, surplus food distributors and community organisations. This themed session takes a closer look at how these networks operate and what factors influence their effectiveness. These networks are extremely proactive in forming relationships in local areas to put in place proactive and creative sourcing practices. Decisions around whether surplus food can be taken involve logistical and infrastructural knowledge around whether a group has the appropriate resources to capture, store and redistribute food items on offer. This session provides a space for those involved in the organisation of these networks to share how they manage these systems of collaboration and what influences their success at community level.

‘FareShare Midlands turns an environmental problem into a social solution’

Shay Dempsey, Food Supply Manager, FareShare Midlands

‘Waltham Forest's Food Resilience Network - food redistribution as a way to build support systems amongst the community sector’

Sophie Aoun, Project Coordinator, The Hornbeam Centre

‘Surplus food and community projects’

Jade Bashford, Programme Co-ordinator at The Real Farming Trust, and Programme Manager for the Ready Healthy Eat Project



A sustainable future for the community sector?

Session description:

Despite the increased reliance on the community food sector to respond to the mounting challenges of food poverty, insecurity and the cost-of-living crisis, these organisations are facing a precarious future. Difficulties in generating income and access to grants pose a threat to the continuation of the fantastic work being undertaken in communities. This session takes a closer look at the sustainability of the sector, commenting on the benefits, drawbacks and applicability of different income generation models and providing grounded insights in how community food organisations are navigating the problems threatening their future.

‘Reflective learning on policy engagement from Ready Healthy Eat Project partners’

Jordon Lazell, Lecturer in Marketing, Essex Business School, University of Essex

‘An overview of the NOW Group’

Pauline Fitzsimons, Director of Operations in Northern Ireland, The NOW Group

‘The growing pressure on independent food banks and a cash first approach to food insecurity’
Dee Woods and Abby Preston, Independent Food Aid Network

Policy pathways

Session description:

This session asks how can we move towards change through policy pathways and what do these pathways look like? This session will feature insights from those engaged in policy making and delivery to offer expertise in the best way through which those with frontline experience can input into the policy process across local, regional and national scales.

'Brighton & Hove Food Partnership's work in the area of policy engagement'

Vic Borrill, Director of Brighton & Hove Food Partnership

'A manifesto to eliminate the need for food banks by 2030'

Andrew Forsey, National Director, Feeding Britain

'Reflective learning on policy engagement from Ready Healthy Eat Project Partners'

Jordon Lazell, Lecturer in Marketing, Essex Business School, University of Essex



Panel debates

As well as presentations from academics and practitioners, the symposium also featured a number of panel debate discussions. The following gives further details on these debates and who took part.



Integrating the alternative within the conventional: What does a sustainable food system look like?

Panel description:

In recognising that the conventional food system is currently failing on many fronts, the question is posed of what are the alternatives and what role should they be playing in a more sustainable food system? This panel debate brings together practitioners to discuss instances where alternative practices circumvent the conventional food production, retailing and distribution channels. Furthermore, what role should they play in tackling issues like food poverty amongst other systemic challenges and how might they be expanded?

Sue O'Neil-Berest, Food Education Manager, Cyrenians, Edinburgh

Moya Kneafsey, Director of the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University

Lucy Antal, Senior Manager & Lead for Food Justice, Feedback

Ready Healthy Eat Partners

Panel description:

Project partners of the Ready Healthy Eat project share their highlights and key learning points, as well as what it has been like working in partnership.

Sophie Aoun, Project Coordinator, The Hornbeam Centre

Sue O'Neil-Berest, Food Education Manager, Cyrenians, Edinburgh

Pauline Fitzsimons, Director of Operations in Northern Ireland, The NOW Group

Vic Borrill, Director of the Brighton & Hove Food Partnership



Food as a Connector- Engaging Social Eating Project Partners

Panel description:

We know that food can do much more than feed people, and that it has value beyond nutrition. It is a key ingredient in sustainability, social inclusion, community cohesion and health and wellbeing agendas. Realising the more holistic value of food means working across and within organisations, developing new products, services and systems. It may also require a shift in thinking or approach.

Lee Kimberley, Nottingham City Council

Jill Carter MBE, Pulp Friction

Steph Henry, Bassetlaw Food Insecurity Coordinator

Shay Dempsey, Food Supply Manager, FareShare Midlands



- 1) Why does your organisation use food to create beyond nutrition?
- 2) What has driven this shift in thinking and practice?
- 3) What are the benefits and challenges in trying food across multiple agendas and stakeholders?
- 4) What service-innovations, systems-changes, partnerships and projects showcase the 'more than' approach?

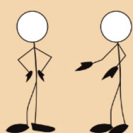
Breakout group exercises

A series of smaller breakout exercises took place after lunch on both days of the symposium. The aim was for attendees to learn practical skills and participate in discussions on a range of topics

Advocacy

Led by: Pauline Fitzsimons, The NOW Group

Advocacy means giving a person support to have their voice heard. It is a service aimed at helping people understand their rights and express their views. We will explore what advocacy is and who can become an advocate.



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Creating Flavour Packs

Led by: Vic Borrill, Director of the Brighton & Hove Food Partnership

Hear about the Brighton & Hove Food Partnership's experience of using dehydration to extend the shelf life of surplus food by creating veg packs for distribution via food banks and affordable food projects. A chance to discuss this and other creative ways of preventing waste when working with short-life produce.

What works?

- Identify and engage potential learners
- Do the research near the ground as you go
- Put the beneficiaries in the front
- Clear expectations
- Talk to stakeholders and agree design
- Agreed purpose first
- Good data

Evaluating community food work - how do we do this well?

Led by: Jade Bashford, The Real Farming Trust, Michael Langmead, National Lottery Community Fund, and Lopa Saxena, Coventry University

This session is for practitioners from community food projects, academics interested in evaluation contracts, funders and participants in food projects. This is a discussion session where we will share our perspectives.

Community food projects often have a grant funded evaluation conducted by academics. To be effective requires engaging stakeholders with different agendas and this session will provide a space to hear from each other. Some questions we might raise include: From a beneficiary's point of view, is an academic evaluation ever good value for money? Is there a conflict of interest for evaluators if the grant holder is both a paying client and the subject of the evaluation? What do grant funders really want from an evaluation? Who needs to learn from an evaluation and how are learners engaged? What are we getting wrong? What is the purpose of an evaluation? Should we design evaluations as learning activities rather than research projects? The breakout group concluded with discussions on how we can change our evaluation process to bring maximum impact for participants.

Local and organic food

Led by: Jade Bashford, The Real Farming Trust

Jade presented the problems associated with bridging the gap between the agroecology sector and food poverty projects. The rest of the session was open space for anyone who would like to share ideas and discussion on this topic.

LUSH linking up suppliers and hubs

Agroecological business sells extra produce 'for someone that needs it' to existing customers, at full retail price.

Supplier partners food hub, who is good at engaging in communities of need and uses the food.

How To: Set
Up a Social
Eating Event



How to organise a Social eating event

Led by: Marsha Smith, Coventry University

- Do you want to better understand the benefits of the social eating model?
- Do you need some practical advice on engaging diverse audiences or involving partners?
- Are you unsure whether you could run a social eating mealtime?

In this breakout session, we will be looking at the practicalities of running an event and how to pitch this idea to a variety of stakeholders such as funding bodies, local authorities, faith-based groups and community groups.

You will take away:

- Content you can use for funding applications
- An understanding of some key terms and approaches
- Links to online resources that you can use and tailor to your needs
- A sense of confidence about what the model is and how it works!





What and How of Social Supermarkets

Led by: Lopa Saxena, Coventry University

Research has identified various motivations behind the setting up of social supermarkets in the UK, including addressing food insecurity, reducing food waste, providing social support to vulnerable individuals and families, providing employment and training opportunities, and promoting social cohesion.

In this breakout session we will look at the challenges faced by social supermarkets, and their potential to provide transformative solutions for food insecurity/poverty.



How do we move from food aid to more long term, sustainable solutions?

Led by: Sophie Aoun, The Hornbeam Centre

Using the context of Waltham Forest in London as an example, we invite discussion around the challenges faced by both community organisations providing food support and residents accessing food support. We will focus on discussing local, grassroots solutions against a backdrop of systemic changes needed.

A Good Food Nation: supporting older people through food

Led by: Tilly Robinson-Miles, The Food Train

This breakout group exercise introduces the organisation 'The Food Train' and their innovative 'Eat Well Age well' Project. Specific challenges older people face in relation to food insecurity and malnutrition risk will be discussed, as well as how this can be translated into both policy and practice change. The journey of how the Good Food Nation Act was passed through Scottish Parliament last year will be shared as an important piece of food policy, as well as how Food Train successfully strengthened this policy to support older people to eat well.



The Future of Food Symposium autumn online follow up event

Following the success of the 2023 Future of Food Symposium event, a follow up online event took place on the 1st of November 2023. The purpose of the event was to continue discussions from the symposium earlier in May and specifically bring attention to two topics: Rights based approaches to food inequalities, and the Challenges and Opportunities within Charitable Food Supply Chains.

The event opened with a reminder of the topics covered from the symposium event in May and the purpose of this online event.

1) Rights based approaches to Food Inequalities

This first part of this follow up, online symposium was a discussion between practitioners working on rights based approaches to food.

Sessions description:

The Covid-19 pandemic and current cost of living crisis has highlighted entrenched inequalities in food and nutrition security. It has exposed socio-economic barriers to healthy and sustainable food for those most vulnerable. Charitable food aid has primarily been the means to address these inequalities. However, it does not follow from this that the right to adequate food and nutrition is realised.

The panel debate featured:
Lopa Saxena, Coventry University
Patrick Mulvany, Food Ethics Council
Irina Martin, Nourish Scotland
Wendy Eades, Law for life

2) The challenges and opportunities of charitable food supply chains

The second part of the follow up online symposium was the presentation of research from Jordon Lazell and Debashree De, Essex Business School, University of Essex

This session focused on the important work within charitable food supply chains that provide a lifeline of accessible food provision to community organisations.

The findings from a study that explored this sector's need for greater resilience was presented. The study was titled: 'A more resilient food future? The challenges and opportunities of charitable food supply chains'

The follow up online event closed by announcing the details of 2024 Future of Food Symposium.



Conclusions from the Symposium Committee

Over the course the symposium in May, and the follow up online event in November, five key conclusions are made:

1) Firstly the need to move beyond a crisis intervention focus. Whilst food provisioning systems have been effective in helping people in emergency situations, there is a need to focus on the longer-term resilience of such systems. This means progressing towards systemic, networked and socially orientated models of food provision. Whilst it is important that we continue to comprehend and learn from the upheaval of the pandemic, longer term food system resilience will only come from a more forward thinking and holistic approach.

2) The importance of the role of food in society continues to rise in the agenda of national, regional, and local policy makers. The pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis has meant an increasing focus on not just the supply chains through which food reaches people, but also who is not being reached and why. Further to this there has been a sustained focus on the role of food in mental and physical health. Overall it is evident that food cannot be solely addressed as it comes with a multitude of intersecting issues. A lens that considers health, wellbeing, social inclusion, climate change and a host of other societal challenges is crucial. Only when these are addressed collectively can change to be achieved.

3) There is a need for greater focus on food ecosystems that provide a range of options. This should extend from no-budget to low-budget and beyond, and be equally accessible for all. Such a system should facilitate the positioning of entrepreneurial and innovative food offerings, alongside mainstream offerings, and be well integrated with the community food sector.

4) There is a considerable need for infrastructural investment to build capacity within communities to grow, process, store and service food. Such an investment is critical for increasing the capacity and resilience of communities in terms of food security.

5) New models of consumption are required in order to move beyond the association of poverty with collective community eating. This means new ways of sharing knowledge, new and further partnership forming and a revised focus on entrepreneurial ideas that deliver community benefits.

6) The importance of advocating community voices was a key theme of the 2023 symposium. The event made an active effort to place community member's experiences centre stage. All stakeholders working in the community food sector have a role to play in understanding how to best advocate on behalf of communities.

The 2024 Future of Food Symposium will take place at the University of Nottingham Business School. The theme of dignity will look to bring into focus building food security at-scale, through community-led and universal models of provision, and the continued opportunity to interrupt short-term, downstream and stigmatising interventions that reproduce inequalities and intensify the environmental crisis.

Appendix

Kayleigh's lived experience keynote speech in full

My name is Kayleigh. And I have volunteered at the Stroud network of hubs for the last 3 years, setting up my own full community hub last year. I was moved to becoming involved in the community hub movement after personally experiencing what it is like to have to rely on the benefit system.

When first asked to talk about my own experiences, there is a natural reaction to say no way, and walk away. Who likes talking about their finances? Who wants to relive a period of their life that is steeped in trauma and anxiety? It is embarrassing and degrading to have to admit that you haven't been able to provide for your family. It is not a conversation that I would ever be comfortable with, but it is exactly that sense of embarrassment and discomfort that effectively silences the millions suffering. As someone with the skills and articulation to be able to speak about it, I feel an imperative to do so, in a bid to try and break down some of the stigma and shame that surrounds this emotive issue.

So, here's my story.

In 2019, I was running a successful childminding business. As a single mum to four children, then aged between the ages of 5 and 13, it was a great fit around the demands of motherhood and enabled me to provide a reasonably comfortable life for us since the break-up of my marriage some years before. Then I experienced a number of events, not least a pandemic, that went to prove how quickly life can unravel.

I had to close my business with no option to reopen, and my eldest son experienced a mental health crisis. Watching my beautiful boy slip into a place where I couldn't solve his problems was the worst experience of my life. As we entered the minefield of waiting times and assessments through the Children and Adolescent Mental Health System, I was left to do all I could to protect him from his poorly mind that was tormenting him with suicidal ideation and constant self-harming.

The real and present danger he was to himself was the most terrifying thing I have ever known. Added into the fact that I was on the shielded list and the pandemic was in full swing, I knew a new definition of what it felt to be isolated.

This isn't a woe in my story, I am one of the lucky ones. I had some savings behind me, an ex-husband that pays regular maintenance, a family willing to help, but I got a glimpse into what life would have quickly become without those protecting factors, and what life for so many within our society is. I didn't have a partner, and my family, although supportive were not local. It was 2020 and the job market was non-existent.

I was practical. I used my savings, lucky I had them, to pay off the car loan and the credit card and all the normal things that come with life. I changed my mortgage to interest only, I was able to do that, and cut out everything that was non-essential. The kids were furious that we lost Netflix and Xbox subscriptions, but everything had to go. I was awarded universal credit and I had enough money to see me through the first five week wait, which I appreciate a lot don't.

I felt utterly confident that I would be able to do this, it would be a temporary measure, and that once the world returned to normal, I'd easily be able to find work. I'm a graduate with a lot of experiences in different fields and I wasn't scared to do anything that would help me provide for my family. In the meantime, I did the maths. After all the outgoings, I had around £400 a month to support us with food, clothing and everyday essentials. And I felt like I could do it.

I'm a good cook. I can run a budget. I can plan ahead. I can write a spreadsheet. Oh, how my life became dictated by those spreadsheets as I obsessively tried to control anything that was going on in this whirlwind.

I started out just being pathetically grateful for a system that was holding us up. I now know that a one-parent family is living in poverty if they are living off less than £190 a week after housing costs. I have never found the statistic for a one-parent family of four children, but the math isn't hard.

To start with, we were okay. The cupboards were full of tins and stocks and spices and all the things that I had totally taken for granted as basic kitchen go-tos. I want to ask you about the last time you saw the back of your pantry cupboard without it being a cleaning and sorting session and getting rid of all the things that are out of date and lurk there. I'd not really seen the back of mine.

I'm a keen cook and nowadays I work as a chef, so I knew how to create a meal from basic ingredients. In the past, I'd thought that eating lentils was no hardship and creating soups and stews was cheap and nutritious ways of feeding my family. I started out with a real naivety of how easy I was going to find it. I just had to be creative, right? That was okay to start with, but as my cupboards became more and more bare, I recognised that the budget didn't extend to replacing the herbs and spices and the olive oil and the flavour bombs I was used to having to make cheap ingredients more palatable.

The car went wrong, the washing machine packed up. I was suddenly looking at the end of my overdraft and three weeks before any money was coming in. It happened repeatedly. The spreadsheets could budget for everything I could predict, but life's just not like that. And inevitably, there were constant curveballs. The back of the cupboards became more and more visible. The kids' ever-present mantra "what's for tea" became stomach-sinking, soul-sucking panic of how to cobble something together.

The saddest thing of all for me was the realisation that in order to save the hunger, our diet was becoming more and more processed. I could buy pizza for 67p and some garlic bread, the oven would be on for 15 minutes and we'd be satisfied. I found myself buying ready meals because they worked out so much cheaper than the ingredients.

This is something that makes me really angry. Celebrity chefs are creating meals that cost less than a pound a plate. But the list of things you need to buy is far more than the multiple of plates you're going to make. Yes, you only use 25p's worth of olive oil, but that's not how you buy it. It's patronising and it misses the point of what it actually looks like to not be able to afford a list of ingredients.

Ready meals and processed food became the fail-safe option when there's nothing to make cheap ingredients taste nice. At the start of the month, I did my best to batch cook and plan ahead, but every month it got harder. I stopped eating with the children, I fed them and ate anything they left behind, bulking it out with some bread.

Getting to this point wasn't what bothered me. I still felt like I was okay. I still felt lucky. I developed a real insight into the barriers that exist for a lone parent. The Job Centre moved me to a programme called Restart. I was assigned a job coach who would find things for me to apply for. My main barrier was the lack of childcare in my area. There was no before or after school provision. Childminders were all over subscribed. I had to be at the school gates at 3.20 every day. Plus, I was still caring for a son that couldn't always face school and couldn't ever be left alone.

My life became a further spiral of constant threats of benefit sanctions as I applied for new jobs, jobs I knew I couldn't accept. Restarting the Jobcentre kept passing how I could get help with childcare costs and I felt they thought I was lying when I kept saying that the facility just didn't exist.

Then the £20 uplift was removed. I didn't even realise it was a thing until it was taken away. And my available income went from about £400 to £320 for the five of us. I was falling further into debt and I had to turn to my family to bail me out. I'm lucky that I have that and I'll be forever grateful that it compounded the feelings of failure and the increasing sense of desperation.

At this point, my own mental health began to severely suffer, and I went on medication. My cognitive function was really compromised, and the spreadsheets became a thing of the past. I sold everything I could think that wouldn't affect the kids. The overwhelm at this point was excruciating to the point of being debilitating.

Trying to juggle day to day became all-consuming. What will we eat? How many more times could I sew up that school jumper without it being obvious? Was I going to be able to afford the next electricity bill? Was that a hole in the sole of my daughter's shoe? These questions and the constant presence of a million more like them consume me.

It's exhausting being poor. Not only that, unless I was applying for every job that I could possibly do, and many I knew I logistically couldn't, then a sordid amicus of no-benefit sanction would be wheeled over me and questions would be further amplified. I felt increasingly dehumanised by a system set up to make the feelings of failure turn into desperation very quickly.

I couldn't see a way out. I'd always assumed that I could fall into a minimum wage, checkout job or cleaning job, but literally nothing I could find would work around the circumstances I was in. My need to protect my son from himself was never appreciated. When I explained that I'd have to pick my daughter up from school at 3.20 every day and I couldn't work weekends, I was constantly met with, we can't accommodate that or it wouldn't be fair on our other employees.

The physical pull of hunger was the least of the problems. The constant shame. The efforts in hiding it. The sheer frustration of not being able to find work. It's 3am staring at the wall wondering how you're going to afford Christmas. It's having to stop cooking a roast dinner on a Sunday because having the oven on for 2 hours is too expensive and boiling pasta is quicker. It's feigning exciting sleepovers in the lounge on cold nights because being together in one room kept us all warm. It's totally and utterly exhausting.

As we become more and more fragmented as a society, we are more and more blinkered into believing that poverty is something that's not happening on our streets. The network of community hubs are absolute proof that we don't see half the problem. Working families are finding the cost of living untenable and needing safe places to go where they can receive a meal and a bag of food with the protective self-respect notion that they can also volunteer and help cook or serve in the community café.

Millions of tonnes of food are being sourced and distributed by a silent army of visionaries who actually see what's going on in their communities. They're largely unpaid, their funding tenuous, and their security and tenure on premises from which to work out of, disgustingly overlooked. And all this makes me so angry. I'm raging that not only does poverty exist for millions of people in this country, but those that are trying to do something about the fact are expected to do so with little or no funding, little or no security, and on zero pay.

When some grant or funding does appear, we are pathetically grateful to be able to stock our community fridges and make a load of ready meals to give out in the community cafe. What is actually happening is that the erosion of public services has reached such a critical level that to solve the problem on the ground it is cheaper to award grants to groups of volunteers than to pick up the worst of the pieces than it is to actually unpick and properly fund the services and systems that should be there to prevent the suffering at this level in the first place.

So I speak out. I'm the voice of millions of people who are still in that awful place that I merely glimpsed. I'm the person on your street that's waking at 3am, terrified and overwhelmed with anxiety about how to make their last £5 stretch far enough to satisfy their kids' hunger. I'm that person that has to find another food voucher or referral to a food bank without it crushing the last of their spirit. I am also one of the millions of tired volunteers that are fed up holding this country up. I am here to be that voice.

Thanks for listening

