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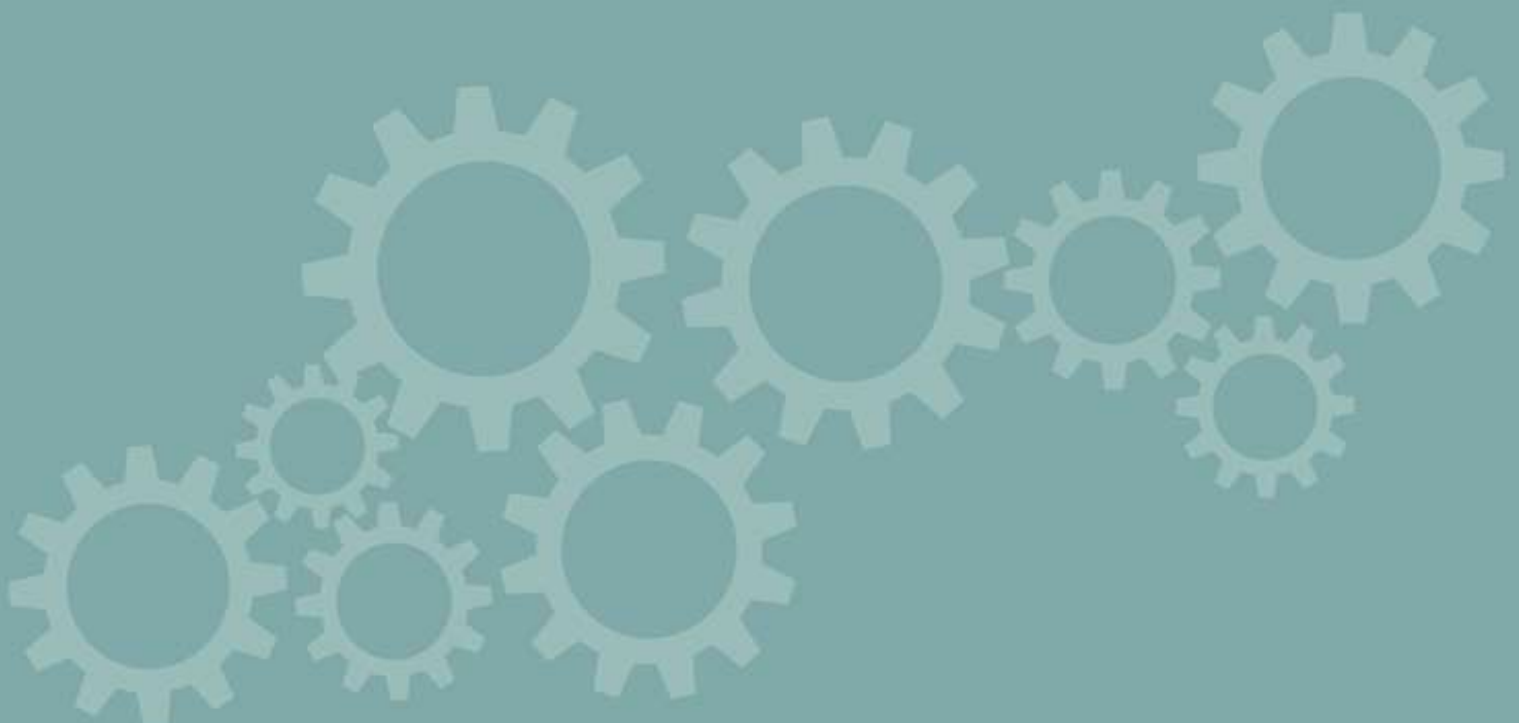
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## **Fun, Food, Folk: The Centrestage approach to dignified food provision**

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Research report for the ethnographic strand of the  
evaluation of Centrestage Catalyst Communities

Briege Nugent and Oliver Escobar



**What Works Scotland** (WWS) aims to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

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- better understand what effective policy interventions and effective services look like
- promote the use of evidence in planning and service delivery
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- Improvement Service
- Inspiring Scotland
- IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services)
- NHS Education for Scotland
- NHS Health Scotland
- NHS Health Improvement for Scotland
- Scottish Community Development Centre
- SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

This is one of a series of papers published by What Works Scotland to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform. What Works Scotland is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Scottish Government.

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<sup>1</sup> The group included Sir Harry Burns, University of Strathclyde; Christine Scullion, the Robertson Trust; Jim McCormick, Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Oliver Escobar, University of Edinburgh; Jackie McAllister, Rachael McKechnie and Matthew Linden from the Scottish Government; Jacqueline Lennon, West Coast Capital; Steven Marwick, Evaluation Support Scotland, Lynn Hendry, STV Appeal and the Hunter Foundation and Fiona McKenzie and Paul Mathieson, Centrestage.

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# 1. Summary

The need for food provision is growing in the UK and the shame and stigma of resorting to foodbanks are significant barriers to access for those needing support (Lambie-Mumford, 2013; Garthwaite, 2016, 2016b). Solving food poverty and the causes of increased foodbank use may take time; meanwhile, there is a clear need for immediate innovations in the provision of services.

Centrestage is a charity, backed by the social enterprise Centrestage Music Theatre CIC, that uses food and the arts to engage people, help to improve their life chances and (re)build communities.

This summary outlines key findings from research carried out on Centrestage's distinct food provision programme in some of the most deprived areas of North and East Ayrshire. The Centrestage Catalyst Communities programme seeks to help people to access support, address underlying problems, build relationships and develop capacity for community action. The research set out to understand how Centrestage achieves impact and draw lessons to inform policy and practice.

## 1.1 The research

The research was focused on four areas, namely Fullarton and Pennyburn (Kilwinning) in North Ayrshire and Drongan and Rankinston in East Ayrshire, and the fixed food provision site in Ardeer, with fieldwork carried out between May and July 2016.

The research questions covered three dimensions:

- How does Centrestage make a difference? (Values, practices, organisational culture and leadership).
- What difference does Centrestage make? (Immediate, intermediate and long term impact).
- What lessons can be drawn to inform policy and practice? (Scope for spread and sustainability).

An ethnographic approach was adopted involving 20 days of participant observation across the four areas of mobile food provision, as well as fixed provision in Ardeer and the industrial kitchen. In addition, 22 Centrestage staff and volunteers, seven of whom were also service users, were interviewed. By working alongside Centrestage and becoming immersed in the experience of the service, the data gathered helps to address complex questions about the why and how of 'what works' in dignified food provision.

## 1.2 How does Centrestage make a difference?

Our overarching conclusion is that Centrestage offers a distinct approach to food provision by creating a social environment as well as a dignified transaction. The study demonstrates the importance of social space and interaction when it comes to dignified food provision.

Centrestage started in 2006 building on a core idea: that anyone can gain life-changing social benefits through active participation in the arts. Food provision was not part of the plan. However, through its outreach work in different areas hunger was revealed and the dignified food provision programme thus grew as a result of the organisation's commitment to fostering individual and community wellbeing. In forty-two weeks, Centrestage has distributed 140,440 food portions, exceeding their original projected number for the entire year (i.e. 40,000). This gives an actual Year One projection of 173,878 and provision has already been extended to further areas. The meals are prepared in a purpose-built kitchen with supplies from Fareshare and other donations, and distributed on a refurbished double-decker bus featuring a kitchen for demonstrations and areas for playing and socialising.

As illustrated throughout this report, social attitudes and pressures can make people put on a public performance, while hardship remains hidden and need goes unmet. Centrestage has developed what they refer to as a 'stealth approach', whereby the emphasis is on 'having fun', on reaching out to people as well as meeting need and, in a subtle but real way, this keeps their projects dignified.

There are key differences between what is offered by Centrestage and other food provision through structured voucher schemes in mainstream foodbanks. In particular, Centrestage frames food provision as a transaction between equal parties as part of an ongoing relationship characterised by reciprocity. It is an enjoyable, sociable, positive experience, and, as well as working with individual cases, it brings people together to address isolation and loneliness by building or re-building communities. Those who benefit are given the opportunity to give a donation and this 'pay it forward' approach helps to retain dignity, foster solidarity and contribute to sustainability. Centrestage teaches people to cook high quality meals, and offers pathways into volunteering, tickets to its shows also on a 'pay it forward' basis and connections to support. This creates aspirations and broadens horizons.

Our research found a strong organisational culture that permeates every aspect of Centrestage operations. This could be summarised as a relentless ethic of care and compassion; radical inclusiveness i.e. approaching everyone with 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1959); strengths-based so that everyone is encouraged to identify their strengths; and constantly working to create a motivating and happy atmosphere.

We have also noted key components of the Centrestage modus operandi, namely, the ability to be flexible and adaptable to the environment, continuously learning and improving through ongoing reflection and being creative and imaginative in its problem-solving. As argued in the report, this amounts to a form of creative pragmatism that allows Centrestage



to be resourceful despite lacking resources. This underpins the organisation's knack for meaningful transformations –e.g. supplies into meals, artefacts into spaces, services into relationships.

In terms of structure, the organisation is being increasingly flattened to promote a form of 'facilitative leadership' distributed across all levels, prioritising autonomy and collaboration over command-and-control (Escobar, 2014: 21). Senior staff are seen as inspirational role models who provide guidance and support while encouraging workers to take on leadership roles and act on ideas. The way Centrestage recruits more closely resembles the development of a local movement galvanised around common purpose than the standard hiring practices of a conventional service. All in all, what we found is a strongly value-laden organisation nurtured by value-based practice and acting as a catalyst for a growing community of purpose.

### 1.3 What difference does Centrestage make?

The report explores individual and collective outcomes over the short, medium and long term. We illustrate how these outcomes take place, albeit our research was not designed to estimate their frequency. Instead, we have documented stories around core outcome themes, including:

- Alleviating hunger
- Fostering human contact
- Helping to break down barriers in taking steps towards help
- Providing something to look forward to and thus addressing leisure poverty
- Challenging individual and social perceptions and assumptions that lead to stigma
- Transforming the immediate area by creating a vibrant and supportive community space
- Addressing underlying problems, talking through issues and offering or signposting support
- Building ongoing relationships that generate knowledge to inform effective action
- Enabling direct changes in physical and mental wellbeing
- Creating unique experiences, building aspirations and providing opportunities to broaden personal and collective horizons
- Supporting families
- Building or helping to re-build communities, establishing or reaffirming a positive local identity
- Brokering connections and developing social capital within and beyond the local area
- Fostering community empowerment by supporting local people to set their own priorities and develop local services.

# Food provision by Centrestage

In the first 42 weeks of food provision in Drongan, Rankinston, Fullarton, Pennyburn & Ardeer:



**17,799** beneficiaries

9,720 attendees aged 4 weeks to 80 years old

8,079 people got food from others attending



**140,440** portions

Year 1 projection: 173,878

Year 1 estimate: 40,000



**£18,360.71**

in 'pay it forward' donations



**3,967**

hours of children's play



**28**

active volunteers

All food provision, including summer food projects:

**31,536**

beneficiaries



**159,368**

food portions



**£22,190.71**

'pay it forward' donations



**27,359**

hours of play



**44**

active volunteers



Read more in the Fun, Food, Folk report  
[whatworksscotland.ac.uk](http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk)



Infographic showing Centrestage internal data for the first 42 weeks of mobile food provision

## 1.4 Scaling-up the Centrestage approach: scope for spread and sustainability

Scaling-up usually means ‘delivering or enacting an innovation in a way that increases the number of people benefitting from it while ensuring the original design’ is maintained (Shiell-Davis et al. 2015:5). When thinking about spreading and sustaining the Centrestage approach, the organisation faces a number of challenges.

Firstly, despite Centrestage’s success, the team is aware that there remain people who have still not been reached and that this will require further development and creativity.

Secondly, there is room for improvement in getting other local organisations and services on board. Thirdly, there are challenges regarding the very process of food provision. Namely, keeping pace to meet growing demand; maintaining the infrastructure (i.e. the bus, crucial for mobile food provision); legal hurdles; and managing scarce supplies.

Fourthly, the organisation faces internal challenges; it is already aware of these and is addressing them. For example, staff are improving communication between the kitchen and frontline staff through shadowing opportunities. Moreover, to minimise the potential for ‘burn out’, Centrestage has implemented a strategy and set up a ‘circle of support’ so that workers and management help one another to reflect on boundaries, understand and deal with limitations, and be self-aware about their physical and psychological wellbeing.

Centrestage is also looking at its revenue to try to assign more staff to the project and recruit more volunteers. Finally, the failings of other services have sometimes become apparent and forging collaborations while remaining a critical partner is challenging.

The research also highlights key enablers that constitute strong foundations for the spread and sustainability of the Centrestage approach. For example, the strong organisational culture bound by common purpose; continuous peer-learning and adaptability to different contexts; creative pragmatism and resourcefulness; and ongoing collaboration with other organisations. Finally, their model of facilitative leadership has been shown to be crucial in spreading and sustaining innovation in other contexts (Shiell-Davis et al. 2015: 1).

All in all, the starkest challenge is the growing need for the service, which stretches Centrestage’s capacity and raises questions about future scope for spread and sustainability. The usefulness of the surplus food obtained from Fareshare is reduced at times, and Centrestage has to cope with unpredictability and fund fresh supplies. The ‘pay it forward’ model, however, offers some encouraging signs in terms of contributing to sustainability (e.g. £22,190 in the first nine months). The organisation is also currently seeking collaboration with local suppliers. Nonetheless, these contributions may not be able to fill the gap to meet growing need. Outside help, wider connections and support are required.

## 1.5 Conclusions: lessons for policy and practice

Centrestage is a relevant exemplar in the context of the current policy and practice agendas on social justice, community empowerment and public service reform in Scotland. The Centrestage dignified food provision programme operates 'downstream', dealing with the consequences rather than the causes of inequality, and until preventative 'upstream' interventions come to fruition this downstream work remains necessary.

The 2011 Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services established four principles for effective and sustainable services. Namely, to empower individuals and communities receiving public services by involving them in the design and delivery. Secondly, that public service providers work more closely in partnership, to integrate service provision and thus improve outcomes. Thirdly, to prioritise expenditure on preventing negative outcomes from arising. Finally, that public services must become more efficient by reducing duplication and pooling resources wherever possible.

Public service reform is about more than the public sector, and the Centrestage case study illustrates how the third sector contributes to advancing the Christie agenda. Throughout the report we explore how it contributes to empowering individuals and communities to be part of their own service, involving them in the design and delivery. We also show examples of effective partnership where the organisation collaborates with other services. Despite being a 'downstream' approach to tackling food poverty and social exclusion, the research revealed how Centrestage's work can prevent further deterioration in people's wellbeing. In terms of performance, the report notes the organisation's ability to maximise scarce resources.

Centrestage is also playing an important local role in progressing the community empowerment agenda in the areas where it operates by:

- meeting basic needs to enable individuals to engage in community life
- developing people's confidence, self-belief, and agency, which are sine qua non to participation
- brokering local connections and solutions
- developing social capital and community capacity
- re-building community identity based on dignity, respect and solidarity

A clear example of Centrestage's catalyst role is the Ardeer Hub, where community members are pursuing charitable status with a view to creating a social enterprise that will make their food provision self-sustaining, as well as develop other services. Centrestage views their exit from the local areas as the best indicator of success, and fostering the creation of new 'community anchor organisations' (Henderson, 2015) is key to that strategy. This catalyst role is crucial, as there are clear disparities in the readiness of disadvantaged communities to make the most of the new possibilities opened by the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act.

The lessons drawn out in this report invite reflection about the shifting role of the public sector in the context of developing a more 'enabling state' (Wallace, 2013). Centrestage offers a distinct approach to some of the pressing challenges at the service frontline, and our conclusion is that they deserve a fair hearing unbridled by the hold of conventional policy thinking.

Mitigating the effects of 'wicked' social problems requires innovative emergency responses that may look and feel very different from standard services. Funders and policymakers face the challenge of finding ways of generating supportive and authorising environments where evidence-informed innovation can flourish.

We conclude with some lessons that may help to move in that direction:

- Importance of developing innovative ways of addressing unmet need. The cornerstone of Centrestage's services is to create a social environment as well as a dignified transaction. We have illustrated some merits of Centrestage's 'stealth' approach, but there is scope to gain a better understanding by studying similar examples in other contexts.
- Spreading and sustaining the work of organisations such as Centrestage requires ongoing support and collaboration across the third, public and private sectors –the scope for synergies is perhaps as great as some of the barriers to forging viable partnerships.
- Centrestage shows the importance of developing new forms of facilitative and distributed leadership capable of building strong organisational cultures that galvanise highly-motivated communities of purpose.
- It also exemplifies the power of 'unconditional positive regard' for making a difference to the lives of the most vulnerable in society. There is much work to be done to disrupt and eventually alter the status quo of assumptions and stigma around poverty and social exclusion –within and across communities, in public services, and in society at large.
- Funding and policy communities must combine a focus on both upstream and downstream action. There is much to be done at policy level to tackle and prevent the root causes of inequality. In the meantime, organisations such as Centrestage play a key role in attenuating the dire consequences for citizens and communities.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1 Purpose and structure of the report

This report offers an in-depth account of a distinctive approach to dignified food provision. Centrestage uses food and the arts to engage people and offer support to improve their life chances. The project is operating in a number of communities in Ayrshire that are classified as deprived by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD).

Despite challenges, Centrestage has reported significant success in generating local engagement and improving personal outcomes. There is therefore considerable interest from a range of organisations about the impact of the Centrestage approach, how it achieves outcomes, and how it may offer lessons to inform policies and services that address poverty and social exclusion<sup>2</sup>.

In early 2016, the Centrestage Evaluation Group was convened to develop a research programme to understand Centrestage's approach and impact.

#### Centrestage Evaluation Group

- Lynn Hendry, STV Appeal and the Hunter Foundation (convener)
- Sir Harry Burns, University of Strathclyde
- Jim McCormick, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Christine Scullion, the Robertson Trust
- Jackie McAllister, Rachael McKechnie and Matthew Linden, Scottish Government
- Oliver Escobar, University of Edinburgh, What Works Scotland
- Jacqueline Lennon, West Coast Capital
- Steven Marwick, Evaluation Support Scotland
- Fiona McKenzie and Paul Mathieson, Centrestage

This report draws lessons from the ethnographic strand of the programme. It focusses on offering a detailed account of how Centrestage's approach to dignified food provision works and achieves impact. Our aim was to generate qualitative data that complements and deepens the findings from other evaluation strands.

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<sup>2</sup> This report adopts the JRF's definition of poverty: 'when a person's resources are well below their minimum needs, including the need to take part in society' (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016:13). This is well encapsulated by the concept of the Minimum Income Standard (MIS), which refers to 'having sufficient income to afford a minimum acceptable standard of living... that includes, but is more than just, food, clothes and shelter. It is about having what you need in order to have the opportunities and choices necessary to participate in society' (ibid).

The focus of the research and the structure of this report revolve around three dimensions:

1. How does Centrestage make a difference?  
Values, practices, organisational culture and leadership
2. What difference does Centrestage make?  
Immediate, intermediate and longer term impact
3. What lessons can be drawn to inform policy and practice?  
Scope for spread and sustainability

The remainder of this section outlines some notes on the methodology used. Section three provides a short overview of the current context for food poverty and food provision in the UK and Scotland, and some notes about the localities where Centrestage operates. In section four, we share the key findings of this research, regarding Centrestage's values, practices, culture, leadership, impact and challenges. In the final section, we draw key lessons for the spread and sustainability of the Centrestage approach, as well as implications for policy and practice.

## 2.2 Methodology

The fieldwork began in May and was completed by the middle of July 2016.

There were two sources of data:

1. Twenty-two people across the organisation took part in semi-structured **qualitative interviews**. Specifically, seven managers, seven Centrestage workers on the food bus (i.e. drivers, chefs and entertainers), and seven volunteers, all of whom were also recipients of the service. In addition, one volunteer who does not work on the bus was also interviewed because of their long-standing relationship with Centrestage. The objective of these semi-structured interviews was to capture the background, culture and ethos of Centrestage, as well as to document personal journeys and insights offered by individuals in terms of impact felt, motivations, challenges and future developments. The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed.
2. We also carried out 20 days of ethnographic fieldwork. Sixteen days of **participant observation** took place over two months across the four different sites where mobile food provision currently operated at the time (Drongan, Rankinston, Fullarton and Pennyburn). Two further days of observation took place in the fixed food provision site of Ardeer, where this service originally began and which has been the inspiration for the dignified food provision programme. Two additional days were spent working with staff in the kitchen.

By working alongside staff and volunteers, and becoming immersed in the process, we sought to generate rich data to address complex questions about how Centrestage works and makes a difference. The fieldnotes were fully transcribed and analysed.

The team adopted a grounded theory approach, with the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2006) informing the analysis, to be open and make sense of phenomena through close observation, detailed description, systematic coding and abductive analysis.

Data management and analysis were carried out using QSR NVivo software. All names of research participants have been turned into codes or pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The research team approached this project with critical reflexivity, exercised in dialogue between the researcher who conducted the ethnographic fieldwork and a second researcher who did not undergo the same level of immersion. This helped to establish a productive tension to combine the benefits of in-depth understanding and critical distance. The findings were communicated back and feedback from Centrestage staff and members of the Evaluation Group has informed the final version of this report.



### 3. Context: food poverty and aid

This section offers a short review of recent literature on food poverty and foodbanks as a starting point to understand the context that shapes Centrestage's distinctive approach to dignified food provision. The evidence outlined below shows that the four areas where research was conducted are amongst the most deprived in Scotland. There is a growing need for food provision and over the past few months since fieldwork ended, Centrestage has extended this service to three more areas (Shortlees, Dalmellington and Onthank). To understand this dignified food provision programme, it is necessary to place it in the broader context of mainstream food aid interventions.

The use of foodbanks in the UK has increased substantially, particularly among the rising population of 'the working poor', and people often report feeling shame and stigma about resorting to these services (Garthwaite, 2016; Caplan, 2016). Understanding how to help people overcome these feelings, which act as barriers to getting help, is vital.

This study also set out to understand what motivates people to do this work and add to the scant research on volunteers, who are an essential component of food provision. This section thus provides the backdrop for our research findings, and informs the concluding section of the report, where a comparison between foodbanks and what Centrestage offers is discussed, with the latter shown to be distinct.

#### 3.1 Food poverty and aid in the UK

Food aid provision is delivered in Scotland by three types of organisations: local independent organisations; larger national organisations, such as the Salvation Army and the Missionaries of Charity; and churches operating a Trussell Trust foodbank franchise (Sosenko et al. 2013). There are also independent organisations that offer food provision according to what Centrestage staff define as a 'stealth' approach. For example, we are aware of training courses that feature donated hot food to tackle food poverty without it being mentioned as charity to the participants. However, the scope of this study did not allow for research into other organisations and therefore our comparative notes take the Trussell Trust as a key point of reference as it is the main provider in the UK (Trussell Trust, 2016).

In 2004, Trussell Trust launched the UK Foodbank Network to train churches and communities nationwide on how to start their own foodbanks.<sup>3</sup> This is a charitable organisation founded on Christian principles. Their vision is to end hunger and poverty in the UK by bringing communities together providing compassionate, practical help whilst challenging injustice. Care professionals such as doctors, health visitors, schools and social workers identify people in crisis and issue them with a foodbank voucher. This entitles them

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.trusselltrust.org/about/our-story>

to receive a foodbank parcel of three days' food. The service does not provide any hot food. Where a person or family needs another voucher, the care professional (voucher-holder) is required to make special arrangements with the foodbank. Lambie-Mumford (2013) found that workers at Trussell Trust at this point will begin to ask questions of the wider services and this is a mechanism of holding agencies to account and attempting to ensure that this remains emergency provision. As stated 'the three-day provision, the in-built role of voucher distributors and the three voucher 'rule' are all designed to ensure that Foodbank fits within a wider system of support' (ibid: 76).

There is some disagreement as to whether the Trussell Trust Fund statistics are a good way of gauging the extent of need for food provision, a notion supported by Sosenko et al. (2013) and contested by the Independent Working Group on Food Poverty (2016). The latter note that there are other providers and so the extent of the problem, if based on Trussell Trust figures alone, is underestimated. For example, the Poverty Alliance (2015) identified 167 groups in Scotland offering some form of food aid and only 48% of survey respondents (80) were Trussell Trust providers. Nonetheless, although it may underestimate the problem, Trussell Trust data gives some indication of the current situation. The Trust now has 424 foodbanks in the UK and between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016, 1,109,309 three-day emergency food supplies were given out to people in crisis, an increase of 2% from the year before (Trussell Trust, 2016) and a vast increase on 2011/2012 when the figure was 128,697. These figures refer to volume and not necessarily unique users. For example, if a family of three were referred to a foodbank twice in one year, this would count as six people on the system. Scotland accessed this service more than any other UK region during this period, with a total of 133,726 three-day emergency food supplies given out to support 89,764 adults and 43,962 children (ibid). Over 10,573 tonnes of food were also donated and the service delivered through 39,201 professionals and 40,000 volunteers (ibid).

Volunteers are crucial for meeting demand, and they are inspired by a range of motivations. For example, Caplan (2016) found that volunteers in a London foodbank were mostly middle class females sympathetic to people in need; whereas in a Welsh foodbank the volunteers were using the foodbank themselves. Paço and Agostinho's (2012) study in Portugal found that one of the main reported reasons for helping out in food provision was to combat loneliness, pointing towards reciprocal benefits for volunteers –also illustrated later in the case of Centrestage.

There has been a rise in the number of foodbanks and the number of people accessing them. Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) gave advice on foodbanks on over 7,400 occasions in 2014/15, an increase by 47% from the year before (Sims, 2016). In comparison to the rest of the UK, the demographics of people seeking advice are younger and 26% more likely to be male. While the majority are single adults without children, almost one third have children and 12% are single parents (Sims, 2016: 4). One in five children in Scotland are living in

relative poverty and a third of people depending on foodbanks are children (Kontoravdis et al. 2016).

The evidence suggests that this increase in use relates to austerity policies and welfare reforms such as the cuts to Working and Child Tax Credits and more punitive benefit sanctions (Perry et al. 2014; Sims, 2016).

The main causes of people accessing foodbanks reported in 2015/16 (Trussell Trust, 2016) are:

- a delay in their benefits (28%)
- having a low income (23%)
- benefit changes (14%)
- debt (7%)
- homelessness (5%)

Caplan's (2016) ethnographic study of two different foodbanks, one in London and one in Wales, found that people reported feeling stigmatised, particularly in smaller areas, so much so that in Wales some did not pick up their food parcels. As Caplan (2016:7) observed:

They see themselves as failures, excluded from normal society, and often claim to be ashamed that they cannot provide for their families. In this way they have internalized the stigma, because worth and self-worth are measured in terms of the ability to stand on one's own two feet, be independent of others, and exercise choice. The notion of shame has been heightened in recent years with the increasing pressures of a consumer-led society where children want what they see advertised and what their peers at school own or wear, and many parents feel that it is their job to provide these things.

In 2016, the Trussell Trust worked with partners to map use over 18 months compared to deprivation indices. Early findings of the NEMODE (New Economic Models in the Digital Economy) report suggests that foodbank use is highest in areas where there are more people who are unable to work due to long term sickness or disability, or in skilled manual work (Trussell Trust, 2016b). This suggests that foodbanks are increasingly accessed by people with disabilities and the 'working poor'. The highest levels of food bank use have occurred where there have been the highest rates of sanctioning, unemployment, and cuts in central welfare spending (Loopstra et al. 2015).

There is evidence of a class of 'working poor' in the UK with more than one in three families now below the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) (Hill et al. 2016: 1). Of 30 families who took part in a qualitative aspect of that study, high housing and childcare costs were pointed as causes. All participants valued stability but found it elusive to achieve. The adverse impact of poverty, as our interviews also revealed, is both physical and mental:

The emotional and psychological impact of living on a low income was tangible for the families in this study... Parents reported sleep loss and physical repercussions such as weight loss. The stress element sometimes combined with a sense of failure at not being able to provide for their families, or shame at having to ask others for help.

(Hill et al. 2016: 3)

Children reported feeling the 'odd one out' with peers at school because they did not have the same things or did not take part in the same activities as others (Hill et al. 2016). Parents often sacrificed their own needs for the sake of their children, for example skipping meals so that their children could eat.

The Children and Young People's Commissioner funded a study to gather the views of children on this issue and 32 children were interviewed across Scotland from a range of backgrounds aged around seven to nine years old. It was found that they were very aware of foodbanks, food insecurity and a lack of money being the main barrier to accessing healthy food (Kontoravdis et al. 2016). They suggested making healthy food more affordable, redistributing money, and supporting charitable solutions. Interestingly, not all felt that foodbanks were a fair solution, with one child expressing that 'living is more important than surviving' (Kontoravdis et al. 2016: 3).

The Trussell Trust is currently setting up a direct connection with existing services to tackle underlying issues related to food poverty, such as offering debt advice, and cookery and money management courses. Addressing such issues is also a key component of the Centrestage approach studied in this report. Some aims are similar, for example, to help people develop skills to cook healthily on a low budget. However, as discussed in the final section of the report, there are key differences between Centrestage services and mainstream food aid provision.

### **3.2 Centrestage areas in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation**

This report focuses on the Centrestage 'mobile' food provision funded by the Hunter Foundation, STV Appeal and Scottish Government that began in January 2016, with research conducted from May until July in Irvine, Fullarton, Pennyburn (Kilwinning) in North Ayrshire, and Dronagan and Rankinston in East Ayrshire.

Centrestage now also offers food provision in three additional areas, namely, Shortlees, Dalmellington and Onthank. The following data is mainly from the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) (2012 and 2016) and shows that these areas are amongst the most deprived in Scotland.

## North Ayrshire

North Ayrshire has local areas classified as being within the top 15% most deprived nationally (North Ayrshire Council, 2016), rising from 46 in 2012 to 51 in 2016 out of its 179 datazones. North Ayrshire is ranked 4<sup>th</sup> out of 32 in terms of the local authority areas containing the most datazones with deprivation. In the areas of health and education, Irvine Castlepark South, in both past and most recent SIMD data, remains among the 5% most deprived in Scotland. In terms of employment and housing, deprivation has increased from 2012 by 1.7% and 1.5% respectively, but in the areas of both crime and health there has been a slight improvement. There remain 12 datazones in the 5% most deprived.

Within North Ayrshire there is a significant difference in average life expectancy for males. Specifically, in Irvine Fullarton the life expectancy is 66 years compared with 84 years in Kilwinning Whitehurst Park (North Ayrshire Council, 2014). The difference in male life expectancy between the top 5th percentile in Kilwinning and the bottom 95th percentile in Fullarton is 24.7 years (ibid.). It is also noted in the same report that Kilwinning has seen an increase in the number of over 65-year-olds in the area by a quarter over the past ten years, a factor which will have a great impact particularly on service provision in the future. The table of information below collated by Centrestage brings together notable statistics and information from the Scottish Public Health Observatory (ScotPHO) as well as SIMD (2012).

Location	Population	Housing, Income, and Employment	Child Poverty	Health
Irvine Fullarton	3,030	94% in council tax band A-C* 35% income deprived 32% employment deprived 72% receiving benefits	39% free meals  1 in 3 children living in poverty	Lowest life expectancy in North Ayrshire  Drug-related hospitalisations 9x national average
Kilwinning Pennyburn	2,883	Highest adult and youth unemployment in North Ayrshire  98% of homes in council tax band A-C*  79% receiving benefits	35% free school meals  1 in 3 children living in poverty  11% S4 achieve 5+ Level 5s compared to 67% S4 in Kilwinning Whitehirst Park	Lung and heart disease rates twice Scottish average
Drongan	2,921	Top 15% multiple deprivation  65% receiving benefits  Top 15% cannot easily access local amenities due to rural location	1 in 4 children living in poverty	Lung disease twice national average  Top 5% health deprived datazone  Drug-related hospitalisations 3x national average
Rankinston	260	Top 15% access deprived datazone  10% most excluded from financial services and affordable credit	1 in 4 children living in poverty	Top 15% health deprived datazone

\*69% North Ayrshire Council

## East Ayrshire

The data from 2012 shows that in East Ayrshire, 32 (3.3%) of its 976 datazones were in the 15% most deprived datazones in Scotland, compared to 27 (2.8%) in 2009, and 28 (2.9%) in 2006 and 28 (2.9%) 2004. Drongan is one of the datazones in the 0-15% most deprived

having dropped from the higher bracket in 2009 (East Ayrshire Community Planning Partnership, 2013).

The level of income deprivation in East Ayrshire (16.7%) is greater than Scotland as a whole (13.4%). East Ayrshire is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> most deprived local authority in Scotland in 2016 (Scottish Government, 2016).

### East and North Ayrshire in the media

As shown below, these issues are becoming topical in some mainstream media.

*“The mainland area of East and North Ayrshire in Scotland was the UK’s worst region for families. Its higher crime rates, poorer exam results and low average salary – £26,962 – make it harder for parents... Researchers noted that as well as having less sunshine, Ayr locals said they slept less than anywhere else in the UK, getting just six and a half hours sleep a night on average.”*



The Guardian, 31 August 2016

ITV, 31 August 2016

In sum, the evidence reviewed in this section shows that there is growing demand for food provision, while the wider context of poverty and widening inequality deepens and the shame and stigma attached to poverty remains unchanged (Hill and Walker, 2014).

Centrestage operates in some of the most deprived areas in Scotland, and the remainder of this report offers an in-depth account of this work at the service frontline.

## 4. Research findings

This section explores what Centrestage does, and how, in order to address two core research questions:

1. How does Centrestage make a difference?

The focus will be on understanding Centrestage's values, practices, organisational culture and leadership.

2. What difference does Centrestage make?

The aim will be to explore the immediate, intermediate and long term impact of Centrestage's approach to dignified food provision.

Taking inspiration from the organisation itself, we will use dramaturgical language to frame this and the following sections, starting with the 'back story' of Centrestage and its food programme. The section is based on interviews and ethnographic notes (observation and reflection) developed by the researchers.

### 4.1 The Centrestage back story

The Centrestage story is key to understand the value base and practices that underpin the approach.

Respondents describe the beginning as being the result of 'care, compassion and striving to help others', which remains the ethos that permeates the organisation today. Co-directors and founders Fiona McKenzie and Paul Mathieson worked together in the music department at the same secondary school. Both felt, and continue to feel, frustrated with an education system that they view as abandoning the most vulnerable children, watching them fail and lacking empathy for the issues faced. They realised the connection between school exclusion and a downward spiral in life, such as going to prison, as reaffirmed in ongoing research (McAra and McVie, 2010). Both decided that they wanted to do more to end this cycle and this was the driving force for setting up Centrestage in 2006.

The sense and awareness of 'needing to do the right thing' continues to be the main motivation for what they do:

*"We both have the same ideas of doing the right thing, so it is the morally right decision rather than the business decision... This has cost us, I sold my flat for this and my car... we are not financially motivated but I knew that it would work."*

*Manager 2*

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Without public funding and at considerable personal cost they built their own theatre. This seems a place designed to reflect artistic aspiration while being accessible and inclusive. The



idea was to offer dance, music and theatre classes to people of all ages and abilities, and those who could afford to pay would pay, and those who couldn't would not. Many of these classes eventually culminate in a performance and the revenue generated through ticket sales contributes to the upkeep of the service. This 'pay it forward' approach is central to their business model and inspires and entrenches the value of reciprocity.



*The Centrestage theatre*

This is part of what Centrestage staff call 'intervention by stealth.' They argue that this stems from their understanding of the often stoic nature of people in need, and that this discrete and flexible payment system means that Centrestage services can be accessible to all.

There is evidence of the success of this model of 'pay what you want', particularly when it is combined with a charitable cause (Gneezy et al. 2010). Evidence suggests that those who can pay often give more than the actual value because of the resultant positive image of self-identity created (Gneezy et al. 2012).

In the Centrestage approach, service provision is framed as a transaction between equal parties in an ongoing relationship characterised by reciprocity:

*“If I can't pay all of it, I'll pay what I can, and if I can't pay at all you don't need to pay at all. You can help me out though, and that means it's a transaction regardless... If I can pay for something I think I should pay for something. If I can pay a lot, I'll pay a lot because I want to help and if I can't pay anything, that's fine, but hopefully I'm going to get to a stage where I can pay something.”*

#### *Manager 1*

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This business model is unusual and senior staff note that funders sometimes struggle to understand their way of doing things. In their view, this requires other organisations to take a chance, think ‘outside of the box’, and be willing to support the vision.

Over time, Centrestage staff have had to become resourceful with limited resources, developing the know-how to make things happen:

*“You would be surprised how often folk say no to me on a daily basis. It makes me more determined. I remember we went to the X Bank and this guy, we put our hearts on the paper and he just laughed. We went around them all and we could get it through an inside man, a friend of a friend who knew a person in Kilmarnock and they vouched for us”*

#### *Manager 2*

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In 2008, with additional funding provided by the Robertson Trust, the organisation expanded to support prisoners in HMP Kilmarnock, during and post-release with various aspects of their lives; helping with needs as well as building strengths, for example, helping with housing and developing creative and digital skills. Since then, this mind-set of ‘reaching out’ to excluded populations has become embedded within their value system and modus operandi.

For instance, Centrestage now also has a *Gie it Laldy* project for individuals, families and friends affected by dementia and a *Musical Generations* project, within the theatre and outreach programmes, to create a sense of belonging and improve wellbeing through music and the arts.

Another example, the *Unite* programme, encompasses *Reaching Out*, *Rising Stars* and *Aspire* groups to enable children, young people and adults living with a range of additional support needs and learning disabilities to participate fully within the Centrestage community. They are given new opportunities in performing, creative arts and volunteering. *Reaching Out* is an informal, sociable and high-energy drop-in class for adults; *Rising Stars* is for children aged six to 14 years old; and *Aspire* is for those aged 14 to adults. All feature specific classes for acting, dancing or developing creativity.

As well as informal showcases throughout the year, participants in *Rising Stars* and *Aspire* devise and perform the annual Centrestage Christmas pantomime. In addition, *Aspire* participants take part in full musical productions. *Unite* workshops are also delivered in the wider community and at local schools. As noted, the projects respond to distinct age groups and specific needs within populations. These initiatives are largely funded through the ‘pay it forward’ business model and a range of funding bodies such as the Robertson Trust and Children in Need.

As the names of these groups suggest, Centrestage emphasises strengths over deficits. Management views the 15 services now offered as interconnected because they bring communities together through performance, music and food –and this is reflected in the Centrestage motto: ‘Fun, Food, Folk’. This approach celebrates equality and diversity by practicing what we call radical inclusiveness. That is, a way of working where everyone is treated with the same welcoming, open and non-judgemental attitude – a form of ‘unconditional positive regard’ (Rogers, 1959) – and encouraged to recognise their individual strengths and identify what they want from the service. Ten years on, Centrestage has contact with 2500 people every week, aged four weeks to 106 years old, in their theatre as well as other places ranging from prisons to care homes, and from schools to villages (McKenzie, 2016).

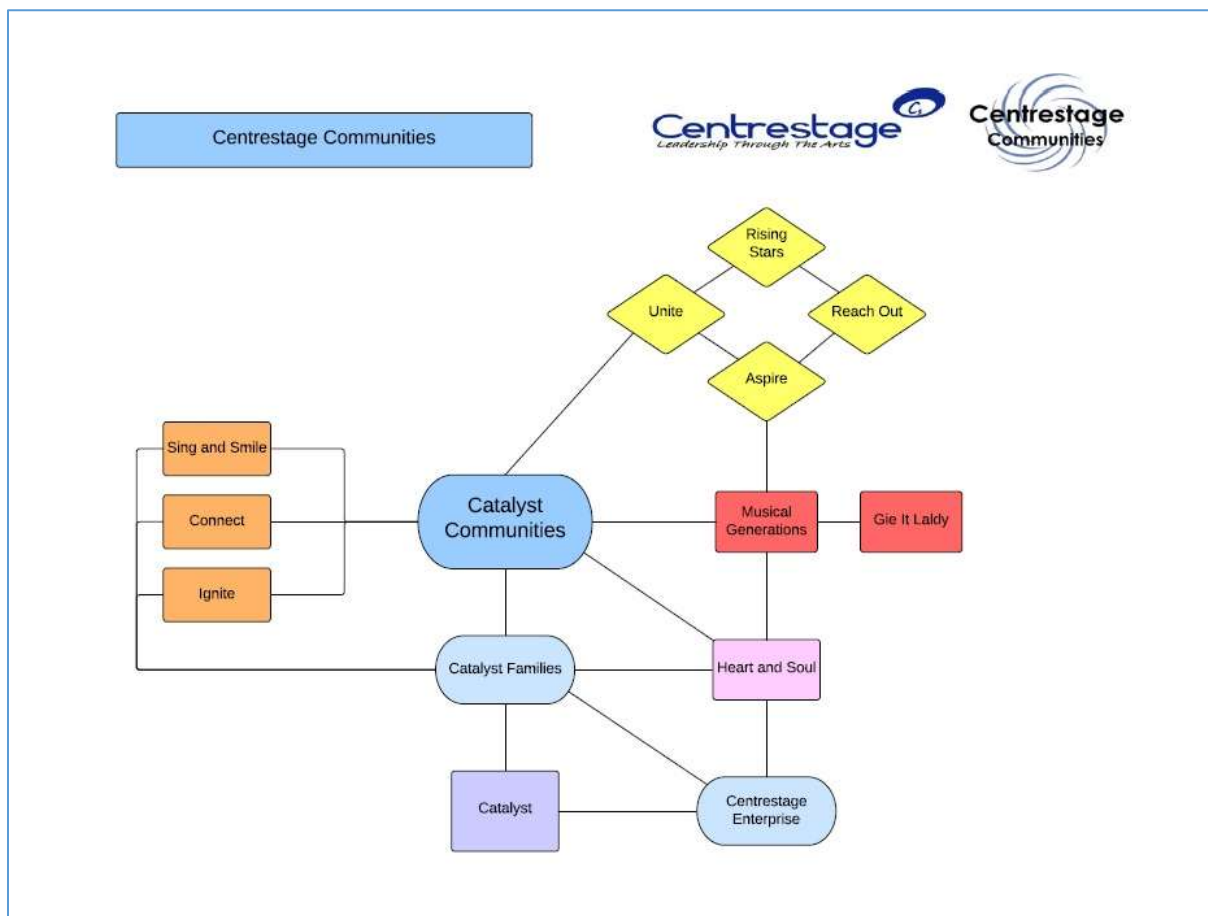


Diagram of Centrestage services

## 4.2 The food provision back story

As noted above, the creation and development of Centrestage was driven by two entrepreneurs with strong social justice values and motivated, in their own words, 'to do the right thing'. Its food provision programme, which is not the normal domain for this type of organisation, began in the same way.

Centrestage was delivering music classes in Ardeer, one of the most deprived areas in Scotland, and identified the poor behaviours by children and adults as resulting from deeper issues such as food poverty and the breakdown of community ties. In response, Centrestage started to provide food at each class at their own expense. Over the past two years, the organisation has worked alongside the community to create a 'hub' from a disused fish and chip shop. The space has been customised to a high standard to respond to local needs, with a reception area, small café, computer room, kitchen, small laundrette and large food and clothes storage room.

In Scotland, a single person on benefits is not always entitled or easily able to obtain a washing machine and it can even be classified as a luxury beyond the local government's legal responsibility. Therefore, as well as offering food provision and a place where people can socialise, enabling people to have clean clothes is an important aspect of retaining dignity. Centrestage and the community organise a 'family night' every Wednesday and a breakfast and social afternoon every Saturday. At both, there is singing and music with families sharing the ritual of eating together, and strengthening bonds.

Aware of growing need, Centrestage began to research how to obtain surplus food and, as detailed later, organisations such as Fareshare are now a key source of supplies. The Ardeer Hub constitutes the template for what Centrestage hopes will eventually exist in other communities currently receiving support. Hub and community members are currently pursuing gaining charitable status with a view to creating a social enterprise that will make their food provision self-sustaining. This will work on the principle of 'pay it forward', making it dignified and fostering connectivity, reciprocity and interdependence.

Centrestage views its future exit from these areas as the best indicator of success. This approach chimes well with the current community empowerment agenda in Scotland, as the project enables local people to create and develop their own services in response to community needs and priorities.

## 4.3 Centrestage on the road: how does it work?

Based on learning from the Ardeer experience, Centrestage decided to 'get the show on the road' to serve areas with no immediate prospect for a permanent hub and thus plant the seeds for local community action. That is how the Centrestage food provision programme became mobile.

This section provides an account of how this works, from ‘behind the scenes’ at the kitchen to ‘the main show’ embodied in the spectacular Centrestage bus. The key learning point throughout this section is the power of seeing potential and transforming - through hard work and innovation - waste to want.

### 4.3.1 Behind the scenes: from waste to want

Centrestage’s key message is to see potential in everyone and this ethos appears to go further, with many components of the *Centrestage on the road* project having been recycled, transforming ‘waste’ into something useful and aspirational. For example, to keep costs down, the bus was purchased from France on eBay. Despite its fantastic external appearance and customised interior, at 26 years old, it needs constant maintenance and repair. The meals are produced and packaged by hand at Drybridge in an industrial style kitchen. The ovens, mixer and all of the workspaces were sourced second-hand and given a new lease of life. Regular supplies come from Fareshare,<sup>4</sup> which is an organisation that takes surplus food from large supermarkets and redistributes it to charities.



*Surplus food shelves*



*The kitchen*

However, this circle of transformation, from waste to want, is by no means straightforward, and the quality of these artefacts and supplies is variable. For example, the bus often breaks down and food deliveries can include high proportions of items such as soft drinks. This

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fareshare.org.uk>

approach, therefore, is not always a positive experience and requires work, creativity and resilience to make it successful.

## The backstage crew and kitchen

We spent time with the kitchen staff, including delivery day from Fareshare, to observe the process of creating a menu for the subsequent week. This operation is like *Ready, Steady, Cook* on a massive scale, whereby the delivery on Friday - the contents of which they know nothing about prior to its arrival - dictates everything. There is no way of planning beforehand and reacting and thinking on one's feet is imperative (see Vignette 1).

The storage at Drybridge is large and during fieldwork there were a lot of jars of mushroom and ale sauces, mint sauces and vinegar that had accumulated from previous weeks. There were only a few small bunches of bananas and no other fruit or vegetables. The innovation required to make this 'work' was apparent. This project involves careful management and culinary improvisation, while trying to stretch food, making supplies last and transforming them into something tasty and nutritious.

### Vignette 1: Think Fast, Think Smart, Act Fast

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, the delivery was not as good as had been hoped. A quarter of the van contained diet tango cans and doughnuts! There were also a lot of noodles, more mushroom and ale sauce, lots of salsa and Dorito dips. As it was coming off I realised the enormity of the task, of making this 'work.'

The emotions that the kitchen staff related reflected the enormity of their investment in this project. They waited with anticipation for the delivery and with only a tray of sausages as their fresh meat for the week, they were all disappointed. The management had to think and act quickly to ensure that the meals for the week after would be achievable. It was interesting to see how staff experienced in dealing with large orders can process all of this so quickly. They immediately knew that they did not have enough meat but despite disappointment they didn't let that dominate their thinking. They had to order in beef mince at Centrestage's expense to stretch out what had come in. They also defrosted reserve frozen meat.

The manager conveyed how they were genuinely concerned for the future. With increased success in reaching out to those in need, the project had already doubled what it had hoped to achieve by this time of the year. How could they continue to afford making these meals when the surplus food orders were not enough and increasingly fell to Centrestage to make up the shortfall?

This project must comply with strict health and safety standards and all food has to be checked, dates noted and safely stored in accordance with guidelines. There is paperwork required for every order, for example, to highlight allergies and record the contents so that after transformation the original contents are known.

Within a few minutes of the delivery being set out, the chefs were already coming up with ideas, as they have to cook every day for the next. The process requires all to think, act quickly, plan, re-think, re-plan and again act quickly:

*On the whiteboard one of the chefs had written 'sausage and bean casserole, ham fried rice, spaghetti bolognese, leek and potato soup.' These plans often change, and the chefs will sometimes call one another on Sunday to work out again what they are doing the next day. Staff also said that if the order has been 'bad' like today, they come in on Saturday to take out food so that it can be defrosted safely and used for cooking on Monday. Their commitment to this project is really commendable. (Notes, 27<sup>th</sup> May)*



*The chefs, December 2016*

*“We don’t even work with recipes; you’ve just got to think as you go.”*

*Worker 2*

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Despite these pressures and potential obstacles, the food produced in the kitchen is wholesome, nutritious, handmade, hand packaged and ambitious.

*There was Mexican chicken, chicken and peppercorn sauce and rice, macaroni cheese, broccoli soup, lentil soup, fig pudding, bread, cereal, cheese, Marks and Spencer’s bacon, chilli ham and vegetables, cheese, chorizo burgers and baps. It was the usual high quality and aspirational. (Notes, 20<sup>th</sup> May)*

Observing the process of the meals being made and then distributed was an emotionally-charged experience for the researcher and highlighted multiple challenges. Based on the observations, it was concluded that making this successful requires talented, committed and determined individuals working tirelessly together from the kitchen to the bus. The workers and management are constantly innovating to improve the products. For example, developing ways of getting children excited about fruit and vegetables, or designing ‘cool boxes’ for families to store and take home the food in a trendy container. This is about raising aspirations, and the belief is that handing out excellent, high quality food conveys the message ‘you matter.’ As a manager put it:

*“You want people to feel valued, so you don’t give them a blue bag that says ‘foodbank’, you know.”*

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*Examples of Centrestage food, including salads and sweet and sour sauce with rice*



The team is sometimes helped by a network of organisations and businesses that give support, for example, keeping the bus on the road by donating repair work. This is another example of people being invested in the idea and wanting to contribute to make a difference. Without being asked, some contributors have chosen not to invoice for some, or in a few cases, all of the work.

There is a quiet dignity also in the way in which this charity is given support, which conveys solidarity, care and compassion. This illustrates the social capital that Centrestage mobilises in its operations.

### 4.3.2 The main show: Centrestage on the road

The mobile food provision programme, when in full operation, involves two vehicles: the bus and the 'sitootery'. Centrestage understands 'the draw' of the customised double decker, which is seen by staff as central to their 'stealth' approach to engaging with people.

Throughout the research it was observed that this artefact was effective at disrupting assumptions, exciting curiosity and disarming reluctance. It is a way of reaching out to people who, as reported by Centrestage and confirmed during research interactions, may be weary of standard services and approaches.

*"Because the bus is a stealth vehicle... we want it to be very much like a lighthouse. So they come, they just come..."*

Manager 1

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*It really is like the circus coming to town, a hulk of a machine with all of these weird colourful dimensions and novelty. (Notes, 14th June)*

The interior of the bus was redesigned by Centrestage. The top deck has four different areas to meet the needs of different groups.

There is a sitting room and an Xbox for teenagers; a gated, colourful soft play area for babies, toddlers and young children; a small seating area for adults; and a corner with beanbags used as a multipurpose area and discreetly by mothers for breastfeeding.

The space has a safety door to the entrance, and evokes the sea with patterns and colourful water features with fish. This area is used to the full extent. Throughout the day there is a schedule that revolves around having breakfast, snacks and lunch. Centrestage performers have regular *Sing and Smile* sessions with children and parents and overall an atmosphere of happiness was seen to be cultivated.



*Play activities and singing sessions on the bus*

In the bottom floor there are two areas. The front section is where food is given out. There is a large fridge where the packaged meals are stored and also a freezer, bags, small seating area and shelves with dry foods.

There is also a small orange square box with black writing stating 'Donations.' Like a traffic light system, there is an intermediate message here to give what you can and if you can. If it is a recipient's first time, it falls on the person in charge of food provision to impart information about this aspect of the service. The donations, or 'pay it forward' part of this initiative, were originally less about providing sustainability than about making a symbolic gesture which framed this as a dignified process, a transaction. Incidentally, nine months on, the £22,190 generated in this way has been vital in keeping the project going. One worker felt that this also helped people in these communities feel that their contribution, however small, matters. It was accepted that overall, despite a very small number potentially abusing this part of the process, the model was reaching those who needed it.

*She came out on behalf of the older women to get the meals and really cared for them. I couldn't help but notice that she put a lot of money (more than a tenner) into the tin. She was reassured that this was not expected but she said she wanted to do it. (Notes, 19th May)*

The kitchen makes up the other half of the bus and has fridges, large workspaces, gas stove, oven, grill and microwave. There is sufficient room for the chef to carry out demonstrations

comfortably with five adults. Throughout the day the chef makes hot breakfast and lunches depending on the ingredients available. Normally, there is toast, cereal or pancakes made to order. For lunch, there is soup and a more substantial meal made on-site as a demonstration using ingredients that can be bought cheaply and made quickly. For example, a vat of beef stroganoff was made within ten minutes using tinned meat, onions, garlic, thyme and tinned tomatoes, and was gone within 15 minutes.



*Cooking demonstrations with volunteers*

As well as the bus, Centrestage also carries a 'sitootery' – which literally comes from the words 'sit' 'oot.' This is a rectangular steel box transported by a truck that is then unhinged, mesmerizingly extended and expanded within ten minutes into a light and plush conservatory with glass doors and steps up the side. Incidentally, the truck driver is a woman who is regarded as a trailblazer challenging local perceptions. The inside area has red carpeting with large seating areas and small kitchen to the side. Incidentally, the carpet was salvaged, through connections, from those used at events held for the Queen. Therefore, passengers on the Centrestage bus and sitootery are at a royal red carpet event.

When the bus was not in operation, there was also a soft play area and ball pit for the children at the side. Once the bus is back on the road the sitootery becomes the place for adults, with the small kitchen also used as a quiet space for people to get advice or make a phone call. When both vehicles are in operation, Centrestage offers 15 square metres of multi-purpose community space. The colourful, modern and expensive-looking garden furniture was put to good use when the weather allowed. During summer days people drank coffees on a cosmopolitan array of pink, blue and yellow chairs.

The bus itinerary covers four localities that bring very diverse ‘audiences’ and challenges to the Centrestage road show – see Vignette 2 below.

The following summary, written by a member of staff ten weeks into the project, sums up the challenges. It also shows how Centrestage tries to understand each context, anticipating what can hinder or strengthen their work, and finding out what people need.

*These communities are hugely different but each has the same innate needs and obstacles; divisions between families and cliques, division and a lack of trust between the elderly and the younger community, a lack of support and friendship for women living alone, a want for something more and something different, a lack of connection between parents and children and somewhere for parents to do something without their children. Childcare is an issue where we go, with some single parents having not been away from their children for a number of years due to having no one to take care of them. Due to this ... it is a struggle to find a bank of volunteers who have the free time to come to Centrestage and experience time within the building to see how we work. Health and fitness is a big problem there with a distinct lack of knowledge regarding food and healthy eating. There seems to be a lack of facilities in every community that cater for members with Additional Support Needs or with mobility problems. We have been approached on a number of occasions for information regarding ASN classes, which is not ideal for the single parents looking after children with disabilities. (Kenmuir, 2016)*

Changes were already being noticed in that early report:

*In these past ten weeks we have had an extremely positive impact with one volunteer from Drongan saying ‘it is amazing to sit on the bus and watch everyone muck in and care for everyone else. People looking after children who aren’t theirs, feeding them, wiping their noses, it feels like an old community again.’ (Kenmuir, 2016)*

This shows that the efforts made by staff and volunteers are rewarded quickly, which reaffirms motivation to not only ‘do the right thing’ but to keep on doing it. The focus of the following section is to understand more about this motivation as well unpack the organisational culture that underpins Centrestage’s values and practices.

## Vignette 2: Show times and overview of audiences

Day of the week	Time	Area
Tuesday	9.30am - 12pm	Drongan
Tuesday	12pm - 2pm	Rankinston
Thursday	9.30am – 2pm	Fullarton
Friday	9.30am – 1pm	Pennyburn

In **Drongan** the vehicles park outside the now closed library with people already waiting. Around 60 families come, often for a family of at least four. The Health Centre is the only option for toilet facilities since the library closed and Centrestage workers report that local people do not feel welcome there, indicating the lack of support within areas for this project and the people who need it. The attendees are mainly young mothers and children. One woman who attends regularly observed that if walking past she would think it was for young mothers and their children. Thus, a downside to adopting a 'stealth' approach, in that not everyone will hear or know about what the project does.

**Rankinston** is a small area with no shop or pub, and only a community centre that may also be closing. A doctor comes once a week in a mobile unit. The 20 people or so who come to the bus today are mainly older women. There are deep divisions within the community. Over the course of the research, younger people with substance misuse issues were beginning to come forward to ask for help and locals who had already been attending were not welcoming. By including and reaching out to everyone Centrestage is beginning to show that this attitude of exclusivity is not tolerated. Some of the local women who understand the divisions felt that organising an event to bring people together, for example a show, could be a step towards challenging assumptions.

In **Fullarton** the vehicles park outside the community centre. Fullarton is a young community where the majority of participants were often young mothers with children under the age of five who found out about the service through the mother and toddler group held in the community centre. There are two committed and invaluable volunteers who provide insider knowledge and are able to signpost people who may need support. Very few men came to this site, although this was beginning to change during the course of the research.

In **Pennyburn** the vehicles are parked outside the school. Around 50 people attend. This is an ageing community with a high number of residents over the age of 70. Centrestage delivers, alongside another invaluable local volunteer, parcels of food to some of the people who have made contact, and are infirm and unable to leave their homes.

## 4.4 Organisational culture and leadership: Values in practice

This section explores key components of Centrestage’s organisational culture, including core values and practices, leadership styles and backgrounds and motivations of staff. The findings are based on the analysis of interviews and observation notes.

Centrestage promotes care, compassion and radical inclusiveness, and seems to attract staff who want to make a difference and view what they do as more than a job. The management has a facilitative style and over time has worked to create an increasingly flattened structure where everyone can feel that they can contribute.

As will be described, this work is both physically and mentally challenging and a key aspect of the success of the service is that staff and volunteers are invested in the idea. The ubiquitous ethos of ‘doing the right thing’ appears as a strong motivating factor throughout the organisation. There is special emphasis on retaining dignity by developing relationships with service users, keeping interactions genuine and working on a ‘pay it forward’ basis – where donations contribute to keep the service sustainable and help others. This model of reciprocity is distinct from mainstream food provision services.

### 4.4.1 Values in practice

A central belief at Centrestage is to focus on potential and build on strengths.

*“The central values are around care and compassion for people, fundamental... just the foundation of it all. Enabling people, helping people reach their potential, grow, nurturing, but a recognition that we’re all part of one community.”*

Manager 1

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In practice, this translates into what may be described as a form of radical inclusiveness, which entails a non-judgemental attitude found in dialogic approaches to community engagement (Escobar, 2011). Staff and volunteers appear to strive to make everyone feel welcome, included, and met with ‘unconditional positive regard’ –an approach that in the discipline of psychology entails understanding through dialogue, unqualified acceptance of others, and belief in our shared humanity (Rogers, 1959).

Centrestage’s ‘bottom line’ is that they believe ‘that everyone – regardless of age, background or experience – can gain life-changing social benefits through active participation in the arts, particularly music, drama and dance’ (McKenzie, 2015).

In the observation notes, Centrestage was described as ‘a place for anybody but it also was a place where you were not treated as a nobody.’ As a manager put it: “Everyone who comes into Centrestage I treat like family.” In *Scottish Justice Matters*, a Centrestage

Director illustrates the determination, commitment and belief in others that fuels the approach. She wrote:

*We know that the arts can catalyse change. We know that people can change and can make change. We know that communities can give each other a hand up. When people are believed in and when they are supported to show that they can, they do.*

*The root of the poverty of aspiration and dysfunction seen across too many communities is the breakdown of traditional values of relentless patience, kindness, nurture, boundaries and consequences. Patience and tolerance can be the glue that binds our community together. It can also be the glue that could bind service delivery and partnerships. Yet, community can sometimes have the mindset of allowing the 'good' folk in and keeping the 'bad' folk out, refusing to acknowledge that the problems caused by labelling and alienating entire generations is now impacting on us all, financially, socially and morally.*  
(McKenzie, 2016: 7)

All interviewees in the research were asked to draw or describe what Centrestage meant to them; 'family', 'happiness,' 'love,' 'care,' and 'compassion' were the main responses, and no negative comments were made despite the anonymity offered by the interview.

*"For me Centrestage is ... a feeling of safety or a second home."*

Worker 9

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*"You get to know everybody and they are like a huge big family and everyone makes you feel welcome."*

Volunteer 1

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In March 2016, 41 members of staff took part in a consultation exercise carried out internally by the organisation to capture the aims and underlying ethos.

Box 1 reproduces key messages and obligations agreed upon.

## Box 1: Centrestage staff articulate their obligations, values and principles<sup>5</sup>

### Obligations

- We are committed to offering a clean slate.
- We commit to enabling everyone to engage with a sense of belonging in the community.
- We are committed to providing an enjoyable experience.
- We are committed to ensuring everyone feels special.
- We are committed to developing positive role models.
- We are committed to delivering an experience rather than just a class performance.
- We are committed to providing a safe and enjoyable environment for everyone.
- We are committed to breaking down barriers that prevent achievement.
- We are committed to shaping the journey...not planning the destination.
- We create an inclusive environment where people come first; we help to build confidence based on trust; we enable people to discover the best of themselves
- We nurture peoples' strengths
- We see and acknowledge the beauty in others when they cannot.

### Approach

The team harbours a deep need to accomplish something meaningful and tangible in order to feel good about its activities and work. This positive energy pushes the team to do more, achieve more and produce desired results.

Inclusiveness is a way of being for the team, with a deep desire to make people feel that they belong to something special. This enables people to have a sense of belonging with the Centrestage community.

The desire to engage with people through conversation, music, drama, dance and design is the hallmark of communication. Breathing life into static ideas and breathing hope into the wider community draws people to listen and to ultimately participate.

The environment fosters an empathetic approach with an awareness of individual needs and the ability to interpret shifting moods of people. This level of engagement reflects a company that acknowledges and values the customer.

There is strong evidence that the acquiring of new information and skills permeates the ethos of Centrestage and this learning is used to maximise its integrity and ethical commitment within the local community.

### Values and principles 'Creating Communities of Purpose'

- Breaking down barriers
- Shaping the journey
- Developing strengths
- Unlocking potential
- Promoting inclusiveness

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<sup>5</sup> Source for Box 1 content: organisational document collected during fieldwork.



#### 4.4.2 Facilitative leadership

The statements in Box 1 suggest a strong sense of identity and shared commitment amongst staff. Management noted that power dynamics within the organisation are increasingly being flattened, and they are intentionally promoting a form of ‘facilitative leadership’ that is distributed across all levels of the organisation.

*“We have had in the past a linear and hierarchical structure, whereas the new structure is described as a solar system, it is all rounded and everyone is part of something and they bring a uniqueness to that. In the end you have a more organic flattened structure.”*

Manager

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Facilitative leadership takes place when leaders (at management and frontline level) prioritise collaboration over command and control, thus acting as facilitators whose job is to ‘mediate and negotiate amongst competing interests and agendas in order to reach agreements and make things happen’ (Escobar, 2014: 21). In this approach, leaders act as enablers focussed on developing the leadership skills of every team member (Escobar, 2011: 65). Senior staff are clear that they do not have all the answers and all involved are encouraged to lead and contribute. Management act as ‘sounding boards’ for new ideas as well as sources of inspiration. During fieldwork, it seemed clear that workers looked up to senior staff and felt that they could rely on them for support.

#### 4.4.3 Pathways to this work: home-grown, poached, by choice or hired

As illustrated earlier, the Centrestage team has developed a strong sense of common purpose that permeates the entire organisation. This is a recurrent challenge for any growing enterprise: as teams grow, core values can be diluted. Yet, what we found in this case is a large team where everyone seems to be on the same wavelength. A key factor in this is the way Centrestage goes about recruiting and steadily building a community of purpose.

Of our 22 interviewees, six could be described as ‘home-grown’. They began their working life with Centrestage and this has been the dominant or in some cases only place of work. Eight others had been ‘poached’ from other places of work or had taken early retirement and made a choice to work for Centrestage. Five of which had previously had contact with Centrestage through dance or music groups and already had a long-standing relationship with the organisation. Three others knew management before taking up their positions, two of whom took a pay cut to take up their roles.

*“I think the big one that persuaded me to go was helping other people that needs it because, like, I took a wage drop to come here ... It’s the satisfaction,*

*especially with kids because I've seen it for myself ... they are going to be getting fed, whether it's off the bus or whether it's a meal at the table."*

Worker 2

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All of the volunteers seemed to have offered their services rather than being asked to participate.

*"So one day the bus came ... It was a case of 'do we just stand there.' So we asked them 'do you want a hand.' When I don't have the wee one I am in the house, so now I come here and help out. I commit myself to being here. I commit myself to me, not to you because X is Centrestage day and I really enjoy it... You get to know everybody and they are like a huge big family and everyone makes you feel welcome. It gives you a wee lift. I haven't felt well for two days ... but coming here today has made me feel a bit better."*

Volunteer 1

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Of all staff members, only one had been recruited through the standard route of applying after seeing a job advert in the paper. The way Centrestage recruits resembles more the development of a local movement galvanised around common purpose, than the standard hiring practices of a conventional service. In this sense, people working for Centrestage are mobilised rather than recruited and transitions from volunteering into employment were common across the organisation.

#### **4.4.5 'More than a job': making a difference**

All staff interviewed felt that this was their ideal job. The dominant theme was that people wanted to do this and felt that it is 'more than a job', describing it as a vocation or a privilege. They enjoy and appreciate the chance to help others and described feeling that they got so much back, describing it as a 'transaction.' As noted before, one of the goals and underlying principles that underpins this work is reciprocity. Overall, wanting to 'do the right thing' and getting a good feeling as a result is a key factor in the success of this organisation. It also attracts creative and imaginative people who go above and beyond the normal call of duty. They feel proud and committed.

The organisation seems propelled by a strong work ethic, with all motivating each other to achieve more, expecting and striving for better. Their actions often denoted considerable emotional intelligence as they reached out to those on the periphery to draw 'outsiders' in. For example, the organisation assigns people the specific role of what they define as 'sweepers', to keep an eye out for those on the outer edges (e.g. around the bus area) to actively welcome them – an example of radical inclusiveness in practice. The makeup of Centrestage is varied with mixed backgrounds, and so the empathy at work comes as result of many different journeys. These roles are demanding, both physically and emotionally but

those interviewed believed that it was worth it because they feel they are making a difference.

#### 4.4.6 'Having fun' and mobilising 'the right people'

Staff and volunteers often socialise outside of work and enjoy each other's company. All interviewed spoke about Centrestage being like 'family.' Through all of this, the emphasis is on having fun and this helps in a very subtle but real way to keep their projects dignified. This is the essence of what Centrestage calls the 'stealth' approach. People can join the party for fun, engage in community-making, and along the way get some of the help they may need.

Some staff noted that the emphasis on care, compassion and creativity are unusual, but that they aim for this way of delivering services to be 'the new normal.' Therefore, an important role for management is to find and mobilise 'the right people'. A manager stated that one of the most important abilities and skills that workers need is 'banter' –the ability to interact in a humorous way, which is part and parcel of good community based work.

*"We need the right people and the right ethos and getting them so that they own it."*

Manager 2

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*"We have a methodology, a mind-set and a set of values that I think other people have as well, or other people have and they are scared to let them out or they can't in the context of their current work."*

Manager 1

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Children in a Centrestage singing session



Halloween fun

#### 4.4.7 Physical, mental and emotional work

From the setting up of the sitootery and bus, as well as maintenance, carrying crates of food and cooking, physical labour is required throughout. There is a conscious effort made by everyone to keep spirits high and motivation up, thereby making this demanding part of the process easier to get through:

*Everyone is working quickly under X's guidance ... X runs a tight ship with tight provisions and tight (potentially no) margins. Through hard work, smart thinking and innovative ideas they are able to transform this food from being wasted to being wanted... The team really get on and have good banter that keeps spirits up. (Notes, 27<sup>th</sup> May)*

There is rarely a chance to 'turn off'. This work is mentally and emotionally draining and requires emotional intelligence, active listening and putting yourself fully 'there' with your own needs to the side. The level of vulnerability that often 'spills out', a description used in both the observations and the interviews with workers, requires those working to be resilient but also to understand where they in turn can get support, and be able to connect individuals or families to the appropriate support channels. This is not just about nurturing through food but also caring, hearing, seeing, acknowledging, recognising the pain of those they meet, and attempting to arrive at some answers together.

This is exhausting but rewarding:

*A woman was standing at the back of the queue clutching a fiver. She had really bright blue eyes and looked almost tearful. I asked how many she was getting for, to which she said 'Six. Myself and my five children. My partner died a few months ago.' I said I was sorry and asked if she was ok. 'I am getting there.' I asked if she needed any help or support with other things and she said 'No. I am fine. I heard about this from a friend and every wee bit helps. This will mean that I can get in electricity this week.' I told her to put her £5 away and she refused to listen and put the money in the tin. She left with a lot of bags of food and said she would be back the week after. She was given a hug by all of us as you could tell she was tearful. I lightened the mood by saying she had great Irish eyes and she laughed. It is really hard. It really is a bittersweet experience working here. (Notes, 19<sup>th</sup> May)*



*Singing in the rain!*

#### 4.4.8 A culture of interdependence and reciprocity

By conducting ethnographic research, we sought to experience the ‘insider’ feeling in order to understand the organisation’s culture. The sections above illustrate the intensity of the work carried out by staff and volunteers. When ‘home time’ comes you feel as though you have really made a difference to people’s lives. It is understandable how people become attached to this type of work. You realise the reciprocal benefit felt, and that you are not only letting people know that they matter, but also in doing so, you realise that you matter too. This interdependence is both powerful and heartening, but equally emotionally draining and requires strength and support.

As noted earlier, in the Centrestage approach to ‘paying it forward’, service provision is framed as a transaction between equal parties in an ongoing relationship characterised by reciprocity:

*“I do the food bit. I get pleasure knowing that I am helping somebody.”*

Volunteer 1

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*He (staff member) looked a bit tearful and explained that the women had taken him aside to give him a bottle of wine and thank him for cheering them all up all the time. He said 'what about that? I can't believe it. Honest, it would bring a tear to your eye.' I had a lump in my throat. These people have very little but the gesture of doing this was something they had clearly thought about; they did it discreetly in the same way as Centrestage bus makes an impact. (Notes, 10<sup>th</sup> June)*

All in all, Centrestage is a value-laden organisation nurtured by value-based practice that promotes radical inclusiveness and a community of purpose built on care, compassion, dignity and respect. Staff demonstrate creative pragmatism, in that they are flexible and adaptable, continuously learning and improving. They are resourceful despite lacking resources and imaginative and creative in their responses to relentless challenges. The organisation has developed a flattened structure that empowers staff to be inventive and act, and attracts people who want to make a difference. It is a highly motivating place to work with a strong sense of belonging to what staff referred to as the 'Centrestage family'.

#### **4.5 Impact: what difference does Centrestage make?**

There are limitations in terms of what we can say about the impact of Centrestage's food provision work, given that this was a short ethnographic study focussed on generating qualitative data. Other strands of the Centrestage evaluation programme will add a quantitative dimension, and indeed a longitudinal study will be needed to ascertain long-term impact. Nevertheless, our qualitative data does provide a basis to map out some immediate, intermediate and long-term outcomes. We illustrate how these outcomes take place, albeit we cannot estimate their frequency. But our hope is that the stories shared here will help to put flesh on the bones of the quantitative data from other strands of the evaluation.

This section shows that, as well as alleviating hunger, Centrestage provides emotional support and a place for people to go, to build relationships and help people to open up, reveal the extent of their problems and get help or connect to appropriate agencies. From our perspective, this is a way of building or re-building communities and ultimately fostering collective agency so that local citizens can develop their own solutions.

Before discussing the qualitative data that was captured through the research, the following table (Table 1) presents the quantitative data collected by the service. It provides information on the number of recipients, food provision, activities and volunteers, as well as the predicted figures from the outset, and the actual and now future predictions for the rest of the year in terms of provision. This highlights the level of need revealed and gives an insight into the frequency and breadth of what is being provided.

**Table 1: Centrestage internal data: 42 weeks (25th January - 1st November)**

	Main areas Drongan / Rankinston / Ardeer / Fullarton / Pennyburn	Additional start-up areas Local schools & community centres for start-up activities, food provision to small groups within the areas, and additional summer food projects that support Dignified Food Provision	Total (Main areas + additional areas)
Attendance	9,720	13,747	<b>23,467</b>
Non-attended	8,079	0	<b>8,079</b>
Total beneficiaries	17,799	13,747	<b>31,546</b>
Food portions	140,440	18,928	<b>159,368</b>
Hours of play	3,967	23,392	<b>27,359</b>
Pay it forward	£18,360.71	£3,830.00	<b>£22,190.71</b>
Active volunteers	28	16	<b>44</b>
Projected portions (1 year)	173,878	23,435	<b>197,313</b>

#### 4.5.1 Immediate impact

We documented instances of immediate impacts, broken down between individual and collective outcomes for analytical purposes (see overview in Table 2). Specifically, the individual outcomes recorded were alleviating hunger, enabling human contact, helping people to take steps towards getting help, having something to look forward to, getting out and getting support, and lastly, challenging perceptions.

The collective benefits observed were that this project transforms the immediate area, which acts as a bold statement of recognition of the poverty and pain within these areas, where until now many felt forgotten. Our research suggests that this broadens horizons, helps communities to have fun and supports families to strengthen bonds.

**Table 2: Immediate impact**

<b>Individual</b>	<b>Collective</b>
Alleviating hunger	Transforming the immediate area
Human contact	Bold recognition
Making steps towards help – Breaking through and breaking down walls	Broadening horizons through food and music

Something to look forward to and get support	Having fun
Challenging perceptions	Family coming together

The case studies referred to as ‘Jim’ and ‘Tracy’ are introduced below (see Case Study boxes) and further developed in the intermediate outcomes section to illustrate the striking impact that can be achieved over a few weeks. These examples, alongside data from other observations and interviews, show what this support means, and the effect it has, particularly on those most vulnerable.

### a) Individual outcomes

#### Alleviating hunger

We came across cases where this project is alleviating extreme hunger. For example, one day three men with a somewhat intimidating demeanour came nervously into the sitootery. It was shocking to hear them admit that they had not eaten for three days. The important word here is ‘admit’, they didn’t say this right away but only when they felt comfortable. The self-blame internalised is a real barrier to people coming forward (Walker, 2014). Individual attitudes, social pressures and stigma can make people put on a public performance, while hardship remains hidden and need goes unmet.

*“Sometimes I can put a face on and be all bubbly, but things are a lot better now.”*

#### Volunteer 2

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*X nearly fell down the stairs and was helped by a Centrestage worker and I couldn’t help but notice how thin she was. She felt brittle. She hides it well under all her many layers. (Notes, 26<sup>th</sup> May)*

A Centrestage volunteer mentioned that they only had £10 a week to spend on themselves after paying for rent and bills, and another volunteer stated ‘You’re not even talking the breadline anymore, you’re talking below the breadline.’ For some people, the first steps towards getting help is revealing their vulnerabilities and allowing this mask to come away.

#### Human contact

An immediate outcome observed during research, and reported by service users and volunteers, was tackling isolation by fostering human contact and having someone to speak to. During our observations, the contact given felt natural, so for example, if someone seemed to need a hug they got it.



Centrestage does not overthink these interactions and thus is able to connect with people on a level that other services may be unlikely to encourage.

*One younger woman who comes along now every week with her son had revealed... that she suffers from panic attacks and is glad of meeting new people and being able to get support... She appreciated having others and adult conversation. (Notes, 10<sup>th</sup> June)*

Some people are being seen, maybe for the first time, in terms of their vulnerabilities as well as their potential.

*Treating people as humans and seeing them as individuals with potential, not poverty, is one of Centrestage's mottos, and this attitude I think transforms the ability to see, so that you look at the person directly rather than seeing past them. (Notes, 26<sup>th</sup> May)*

*"Are they refugees or are they just people? We see people."*

Manager 1

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Those who participate, even for the first time, through making connections begin to receive support about what they are going through, and realise that they are not alone. Over a matter of weeks, people seemed to feel less isolated and as a result more capable and equipped to manage. This is illustrated by the cases of Jim and Tracy, introduced below.

## Case study 1: Jim

An older man in his fifties (Jim), very slim, approached the van looking sheepish. He said he was looking for someone who helped with forms. A Centrestage worker brought him into the community centre to get help from someone else who worked there. She said 'come out after and take a wee bag of things home.'

He came later and the Centrestage volunteer was great, she was giving people tips on how to manage the food 'This can be frozen/This needs to be eaten within two days/you can freeze those yoghurts.' The man said 'so what do you have. I don't have any money with me today but I can have money with me next week.' He was reassured that he didn't need to have any money with him. We asked him how many was it for and he said 'just myself, just for one.' We then put together enough meals to help him for about four days and some extra so that he could freeze it and last for a week.

When we handed him the bags his voice broke and he cried. I gave him a hug and he really broke down. He said 'Thank you. It has been so hard.' He felt so thin when I had hugged him. I had to gulp back the tears and was glad it was raining as it made it all less obvious. I could see that all of the workers and volunteers were affected. We asked if he wanted to come in for a cup of tea, he said 'I just want to get home. I just want to get home now, but thank you.'

I told him to come again next week and we would be there for him. He said he would come. I said 'do, please, do. Tell others as well that we are here.' We all hugged him again and he walked off, alone.

These are the notes made by a Centrestage worker after the encounter with Jim on the same day:

*"Met a man who I took in to the centre for 'form-filling'. I asked him was he getting some meals and he advised that he had no money until next week so couldn't. I told him that was okay and explained how we work and that I would grab him as he passed. When he came out we steered him toward the van - he took a while and became really emotional. Shopping in hand, and hugs and cuddles all round, I had a quiet settling word. He advised that he has had a really hard time, benefits have been sanctioned and touched on his alcoholism as well. He said that he was suicidal and last week had climbed up to the top of the high flats with the intention of harming himself, suicide seemed to be the only way out. I said that this wasn't an option that he needed to come and have a cuppa and a chat with me. He said that he would next week but he was so overwhelmed with how kind and dignified he felt*

*after "whit yeese did fur us here. Av never met folk like that. You are godsent". He said that he will be back but needed to be on his own and process his emotions in relation to the food provision. Not about me but how utterly appalling is it when folk reach this level of despair and desperation - it gives me the rage."*

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## Case study 2: Tracy

Tracy approached the van and we gave her food. She then told us that she had five children, her husband had been signed off from work and they had no money to pay their rent.

She said that he was desperate and said 'I would be better off saying that we are split up and get the money that way but I can't do it.'

Her story conveyed how angry she was... All the people who were on the bus had 'been there.' They got it and they understood both the need but also how to deal with it.

The level of need and vulnerability observed during this research, and illustrated above, is startling, and the anger expressed in the worker's notes palpable. Emotions are a source for reflection and action in the Centrestage team. Anger, a Centrestage manager pointed out, 'gets no one anywhere; it is better to channel that anger into action'.

### **Making steps towards help: breaking through and breaking down walls**

A recurrent theme throughout this research was that the support and engagement on all sides of this project – staff, volunteers and service users – is a choice, both to give and receive help. Centrestage workers often noted the stoic and proud nature of these communities to endure and blame themselves for their situation, as the following example illustrates:

*There were two new faces on the sitootery, Donald and Jane ...they began to open up. Donald works and only takes a very small amount of food but Jane had been without any money for two days and was facing having nothing for another week. Her benefits had not been put through correctly. She revealed the reality of her life in so few words and there was a stoicism about it all.  
(Notes, 17<sup>th</sup> June)*

*"I think Centrestage really realises that people are struggling and people don't want to feel that they're on charity, that they're begging for something,*

*especially people that are working, if they're on low incomes. Do you know what I mean? Because we're brought up in Scotland to, you stand on your own two feet and you do things for yourself ... and it's trying to break that barrier."*

## Volunteer 2

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The barriers for some to come forward are also anxiety or suspiciousness about the service. It can take a while for them to feel reassured that there is no ulterior motive other than to help, as potential service users can be distrustful of ulterior motives or links to formal/state systems. For example, a worker explained that some people pretended that they couldn't spell, as they didn't want to put down their names in case it would affect their benefits. The lack of trust in 'the system' means that some people are reticent to share what is going on in their lives. For the most vulnerable, a helping hand to take steps towards the project was often needed:

*One couple is on the periphery and I speak with them ... He has not left his home in two weeks as he was sacked from his job because of his mental health issues. He admits that he hasn't been this low in a long time, and he had before attempted suicide ... His wife has tears in her eyes and says that things have been hard. I ask him if they would like to come into the van and he tells me that with his condition he can't stand too many people and noise. I ask if they would like a coffee or tea. She declines but he says yes. Over coffee he opens up more about how they have struggled. They leave with three bags of shopping and admit that over the past two weeks they have not had very much. (Notes, 17<sup>th</sup> May)*

During the above interaction, it is important to note that they opened up on the side of the bus and therefore not in the normal square radius between the two vehicles. This shows how spaces outside the space, or satellite spaces, can become the preferred option for one to one contact, away from 'the noise' or the main attraction (i.e. bus and sitootery). On the other hand, the attraction can also mean that people who are most vulnerable have shelter to be able to speak openly because they are not the focus. This ability to create multiple spaces capable of hosting different styles of interaction demonstrates Centrestage's versatility and sensitivity to context and individual needs.

### **Something to look forward to, 'getting out' and getting support**

Young mothers who came to the bus often remarked that this was their favourite day of the week and, without it, some may not see anyone or speak to anyone else until they see their family, which in some cases was rare.

*'This is my favourite day of the week, me and my children. It gets you out of the house and we need this.'* She introduces me to her children and is clearly

*really happy to have the opportunity to socialise. All of the other younger women beside her nod in agreement and say that it is good to get out and meet others. (Notes, 17th May)*

The young mothers also said that they could drop off their child for even half-an-hour at the bus and have some time for themselves. One young woman who is a single mother of two children said that this was a lifeline. She volunteers on the Centrestage bus and said that she views that particular day as 'her day.' She openly admitted that without this initiative she would be 'lost.'

*"Me and the kids would be lost without this bus. I really think that because, see in the morning when they are coming here they can't wait to see the CS Workers and I speak to them now too outside of the bus. I can go up to Centrestage and I don't need to depend on anyone to go, but just come up. I have been to Teeny Talent and Teeny Tap and I don't need to go to the classes, I can sit and have a break. Even this, I feel like I get a break. I have hardly seen the kids today and that is because they are playing and I trust that they are ok. I trust the staff here a hundred per cent otherwise I wouldn't leave my kids."*

#### Volunteer 2

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Many people referred to being at the bus as a way for them to 'get out.' The underlying message here is that people are sometimes self-confined to their houses because without work or money there is hardly anywhere to go locally. These areas, where there isn't even a shop, become hotspots of leisure poverty (Corr, 2014). This bus then gives people a reason to leave and a place to come. Many who came had depression and other mental health problems, and 'being out' helped.

*"It's keeping me occupied, it's keeping me busy, because I've had depression for a long, long time, and then it was just like me taking the kids to school and then sitting in the house 24/7. I wasn't doing anything and ... really, really low ... I'm out all the time and I'm doing stuff that I really enjoy. I love cooking, so I really enjoy the cooking part ... I'm meeting new people every day and I'm making friends."*

#### Volunteer 3

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### **Challenging perceptions**

Centrestage appear to be challenging perceptions throughout the entire operation. Sometimes positive disruptions begin with small things that can have symbolic power. For example, one of the drivers is female and the very entrance of these large vehicles seems to make an impression on people, challenging perceptions about gender roles. Furthermore,

the spectacular multipurpose bus is not what comes to mind when thinking about food provision. When it arrives, there is something intriguing about this large artefact booming with activity and interaction. It attracts people for reasons that have no stigma attached. In doing so, it disrupts the vicious circle that can render food poverty and hardship invisible.

Assumptions and perceptions are also disrupted at a personal level. In one instance, whilst waiting outside with local people, a worker was told that she wouldn't understand the hunger or struggles. This shows that people sometimes view Centrestage workers as not being like them, and yet this worker had been on benefits and had struggled financially for a period. The worker shared this and the locals were shocked that this person had 'been there.' The service also helps young and old to come together, thus challenging assumptions and barriers across generational and class divides.

Finally, by giving food to all who come without asking questions, and only requesting rather than demanding a donation, the initiative also challenges the current feeling amongst some of these people that 'no one cares'.

## b) Collective outcomes

### **Transforming the area**

The impact that the bus and sitootery make is significant to each of the local areas, which are clearly affected by leisure poverty and a sense of neglect of community space. People often spoke about how excited their children were about going on the bus and this was palpable during our observations. It is as though 'the circus is in town.' The happiness, curiosity and joy that this unusual vehicle creates stimulates a childlike enthusiasm across all the ages. It also acts as a 'draw' in a way that other food provision arrangements do not, capturing the imagination and reaching out, disrupting habits, perceptions and helping people to take steps to become involved.

*He told me that he had just come to the bus the week before as he noticed it from his window. Later, it was interesting to hear him say that he would not go to the foodbanks, even though he needed food, and when he had walked past last week, he said 'I saw the folk that were coming here and I thought, aye, that is for me.' It seems that it is not just pride that keeps people away but also the stigma of the places where food provision is available. (Notes, 17th June)*

### **Bold recognition, suspending disbelief**

The Centrestage bus also seems to operate at a symbolic level, sending a message to local people, who openly said they felt forgotten, that they are being seen and there is recognition of the difficulties faced. Recognition is understood here 'as the giving and receiving of acknowledgement, encouragement and affirmation to promote social identity and respect' (Barry, 2016: 2).

*I spoke to one of the local women who said 'there is nothing here and folk need something.' She spoke at length about how the place had been transformed from somewhere where things happened to having nothing at all. She said 'we are a forgotten place. We need folk to realise that people do care.'* (Notes, 14<sup>th</sup> June)

McKenzie (2015: 6) reflected on the Ardeer's community reaction to the Catalyst Communities Project, noting that there was 'genuine disbelief' that people 'unconnected to Ardeer would want to support and include them for no other reason than to make a difference.' This same disbelief has been noticed throughout this research in the new areas, and also how this then changes to gratitude for support and eventually, involvement. These projects are helping people in these areas to feel that they matter.

### **Broadening horizons through food and music**

Some people said that they were getting food that they had never had before and through the cooking demonstrations were also experiencing and learning how to make new things.

*I gave six people the avocados over the course of the day. No one had ever had one before and I had to tell them what to do to eat it. I said 'It is great for your skin and hair.' Everyone laughed. Eating food like this is just alien to this community, but there is no reason why they can't access these things – other than having no money and no shop! They are a world away.* (Notes, 27<sup>th</sup> May)

All the Centrestage performers lead 'sing and smile' sessions with the young children and parents, and this is a completely new experience for some. The bus also has a guitar and ukulele on board and, again, this may be the first time that the children or adults have actually had an instrument in their hands. In 42 weeks Centrestage has provided 3,967 hours of play with the children and young people in these areas through this project. This is about beginning to build or rebuild on unspoken aspirations and introduce steps towards new opportunities.

### **Having fun**

Over the course of the research it was clear that all involved, management, those who work in the kitchen, on the bus and those who receive the food really want to have fun. There is a lot of laughter with people chatting, having good 'banter' throughout the day, creating a buoyant positive atmosphere, which makes this a dignified, even celebratory event rather than explicitly focussed on addressing poverty.

*The comfortable relaxing atmosphere that has been generated is not by accident and the workers are really good at banter and just keeping people feeling relaxed and able to then open up, or just to have fun.* (Notes, 17<sup>th</sup> June)

*"It's always a good laugh ... You do, but you have to, don't you? You can't be a dour bugger."*

Volunteer 5

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This active and motivating atmosphere also creates an inclusive feeling.

*"I think the entertainment part is important. It makes people relax a bit and then spill out what is going on, it has a knock-on effect."*

Worker 5

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A volunteer spoke about how she could let her guard down when she was at Centrestage, and this was in stark contrast to her daily life.

*"It's two-faced, a face for the inside and a face for the outside. It is true ... In here you can be more relaxed, outside you're more guarded because you know people are going to judge you."*

Volunteer 6

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This also indicates that the Centrestage bubble does not necessarily change what is going on 'outside.' In these instances, it becomes an important place of respite.

### **Family coming together**

Young families attend the bus more than any other group and through singing, playing and interacting together this reaffirms family connections. One woman brings all three generations linked to her family each week, using it as a family day out of sorts.

Many commented that they felt that they had become part of the 'Centrestage family' by going along to the shows but also through the relationships they had with workers, volunteers and new people they had met from their local area.





*Fun interactions on the bus*

### 4.3.2 Intermediate outcomes

Intermediate outcomes are presented below at individual and collective level. Many have a key lesson at their core: that by building relationships, underlying problems can be revealed and addressed. As illustrated in this section, Centrestage’s approach is about getting to know people and sticking with them, being resilient and helping them to build resilience to pursue services and find solutions.

People are made to feel that they matter through attention to details, such as knowing and celebrating birthdays. The examples of Jim and Tracy, further developed in this section, illustrate physical and mental changes noticeable even within a few weeks.

Collectively, Centrestage is helping to build or rebuild communities, creating new experiences and fostering aspirations and hope. They are also building connections to other services and developing social capital in communities. Finally, families that have been in touch with the service reported positive outcomes even within a few weeks.

**Table 3: Intermediate impact**

Individual	Collective
Addressing underlying problems and talking through issues	Building or helping to re-build communities
Understanding and engaging with the individuals, knowing their stories, sharing a piece of yourself and using insider	Creating different experiences, building aspirations

knowledge for good	
Attention to detail, 'You matter'	Building connections within and beyond the area
Physical and mental changes	Supporting families

### a) Individual outcomes

#### **Addressing underlying problems and talking through issues**

Although people can come just for food and fun, by establishing relationships with people, Centrestage workers can, over time, help to address some of the underlying issues. On the bus there is always a 'catalyst' present, that is, someone who has specialist knowledge about supporting people with benefits or housing issues, and who can connect them with appropriate services. For example, there are a number of families that are being encouraged to deal with long standing mental health issues and/or debt. People who have been coming to the bus for a while report that it helps being able to talk through their problems with someone else. Centrestage thus operates as a broker, signposting people to services they may not be even aware of, as well as a mobile counselling service.

#### **Understanding and engaging with the individuals, knowing their stories, sharing a piece of yourself and using insider knowledge for good**

Fieldwork revealed how effectively the workers were able to connect with local people, who after a while were treated as old friends. Over time, friendships develop where power disparities can be flattened, although those offering the services are clearly in a position of power that brings with it a considerable degree of responsibility and requires reflective practice by Centrestage staff and volunteers. The workers also understand those who are particularly unlikely to ask for help and attempt to address this discreetly –see Vignette 3.

#### **Vignette 3: Hidden need**

One woman goes into the now very busy sitootery and is dressed impeccably. The Centrestage worker speaks to me and says 'See that woman that has gone in there? She has six kids and is really needing, so make sure that she gets a lot. She won't say and she hasn't told me. The only reason I know this is what other people have told me. It is true.'

When she finally approaches the bus I ask 'how many are you getting for?' and she says 'just what you think.' I then proceed to fill up a bag and she says that it is enough. I tell her that it will go to waste so she may as well have it and give her meals for about twelve (two days worth). Later we have so many yoghurts that there is a drive to give them out. I noticed that throughout this woman stays back. I approach her with a bag

full of yoghurts and she grabs both of my hands and quietly says ‘thank you’.

I have a lump in my throat. This must be what the workers must feel on a daily basis.  
Real need being met.

These meaningful connections also mean that the resilience required to stick through problems is reaffirmed. For example, one woman during the course of the research was having ongoing support, as she did not have a phone, to find out about her claim for Personal Independence Payment (PIP). In another case, the Centrestage worker knew that the man who normally got food for one family was going to the hospital, and took the food parcel that week to the family instead. As the workers get to know people, hidden needs and challenges are more easily detected and addressed:

*The Centrestage worker asked if we thought the regular volunteer was ok. I said I thought they were. It turns out I was wrong. The worker spoke to the volunteer who admitted that ... was really struggling ... doesn't even have a washing machine and were put in contact with the Scottish Welfare Fund to help sort this out. (Notes, 19th May)*

### **Attention to detail, ‘You matter’**

Centrestage workers argue that attention to detail is vital to their approach because it shows to people that they matter.

For example, Centrestage celebrates people’s birthdays if they find out about them. They have cake and make a point of putting on candles and singing *Happy Birthday* to that person. This way of showing care has a profound effect, as we witnessed in the case a woman over 80 who seemed deeply moved. There is also another side to this, as the following notes highlight:

*It was one of the children’s birthdays and the Centrestage Manager discreetly opened the cake, had candles put on and everyone sang Happy Birthday. It was lovely. One of the women said to me ‘You just wouldn't know. Might be the only birthday cake that they have.’ (Notes, 19<sup>th</sup> May)*

### **Physical and mental changes in individuals**

Over the two months of observations there were people who changed physically and appeared to have improved their mental wellbeing. Below we illustrate this returning to the cases of Jim and Tracy, introduced earlier in the immediate outcomes section and now revisited to note developments over the medium term.

## Case study 1: Jim

Through the support given Jim was beginning to get his debt and alcohol problems under control. By the end of the research he seemed a more confident man and now spent his morning chatting with the other locals. It was clear that getting his life back in order would take time, but he had hope that he could do this.

It was hard to describe the change from the week before. He was now smiling from ear to ear and said that he felt like a new man now that he had food in his belly. I smiled back and was genuinely glad to see him and gave him a hug. I also knew that he meant it about being hungry and this made me sad. He went to speak to a Centrestage worker and when I offered him a cup of tea he gave me a hug and said 'ya wee darling.' He seemed so happy to be there.

Another day, when I was out delivering soup, I noticed Jim and he gave me the biggest smile ever and shouted 'how are you?' Jim had spoken about suicide in a previous visit. He was now sitting eating soup and looked much happier. He explained how he was still trying to get his life in order and it would take time but he felt he was getting there. Within a few weeks his mood seemed transformed.

## Case study 2: Tracy

I spoke to Tracy, whose husband was out of work, and she said that he is now in work but they had to wait four weeks for his first paycheck.

She looked younger and when I said she looked well, she replied 'honestly, it was just so stressful.' She thanked us for the help.

### b) Collective outcomes

#### **Building or helping to re-build communities**

Centrestage brings people together helping to build community spirit that many locals said had been gone, or had been damaged in recent years because of high unemployment. New relationships are formed with people supporting one another, opening up, building trust and as a result developing their own solutions.

*“Aye, there's always support, there's always somebody to talk to. There's always somebody to listen, I mean, even if it's just standing outside having a fag with the volunteer and neighbour I met through the project, and talking, that support's there.”*

Volunteer 5

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Over the weeks we noted how those most vulnerable would sometimes move from getting their bags and leaving quickly to then, with growing confidence and feeling more reassured, engaging with others and socialising. This would often happen in stages, leaving quickly on the first week after getting the meals, to then staying for a coffee whilst standing before taking the bags, to then eventually sitting down and participating. In some of the areas where the recipients are mostly young mothers, they come and get their bags early in the morning before spending the rest of the day socialising until the bus leaves.

Over time, people become more confident and get to know the workers, feel increasingly welcomed, and begin to cultivate a feeling of belonging. This can then foster volunteering and new local initiatives –with the case of the Ardeer Hub, mentioned earlier, as an example of how this approach may create new community anchor organisations to revitalise a local area.

### **Creating different experiences and broadening horizons**

Centrestage workers visit the schools in the local area to deliver music classes, preparing pupils for a ‘showcase.’ This is a celebration of what has been achieved, with parents invited to watch their children perform and Centrestage providing food. The bus is also there so that people can be introduced to the project.

*“It gives the kids more confidence because a lot of kids, they think, I'm not going on the stage ... I'm not going to do things like that. So when they come on the stage ... like that wee boy wouldn't even think of doing things like that. Now he does it and he was actually brilliant.”*

Volunteer 5

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Centrestage provides tickets and transport on a ‘pay it forward’ basis so that people from these localities can come to see the shows in Kilmarnock. People reported seeing this as a unique night out, a new experience and also a bonding event both with Centrestage and other local people.

### **Building connections within and beyond the area**

Centrestage management reflected on the importance of making connections, brokering relationships and developing partnerships. They are currently in discussions to contribute to some existing groups in the local areas, which are mainly for mothers and toddlers. These

groups show that there are already people in these communities who are driven and passionate to get things up and going but also appreciate support. One woman had set up her own groups for mothers and young children as there had been nothing in the local area. With the support of Centrestage she accessed funding for equipment and said this was a 'real boost' and she would not have been able to do this without them.

Through connections with the NHS, Centrestage has supported volunteers to take part in cookery courses so that they replicate them on the bus for other parents. We observed a session being held by the NHS focused on how to make healthy food with children for children. Centrestage provided transport for five people from the four local areas; three young mothers, one older lady who lives alone and a young man. It was fantastic to see all engage and realise that the skills developed would mean that they could help others in their local communities.

Centrestage has also connected with the local clothes bank so that an area of the sitootery is used to distribute clothes on a 'pay it forward' basis. In addition, they also support people who want to take part or bring their children to their classes in Kilmarnock, and this ongoing outreach is key to their way of working – connecting Centrestage on the road to its home theatre and thus developing networks across localities.



*Clothes in the sitootery*



*Children learning about looking after their teeth*

## Supporting families

Three women who volunteer for Centrestage said that through this project they feel that their family dynamics have changed, the children are calmer and they in turn feel better able to cope and are happier as a result.

*“Screaming, couldn’t calm him down, and I couldn’t get out. When I went out he used to stand and scream and papa used to crack up. He’s at it again, you need to come back. I couldn’t go anywhere but now I do because he’s changed completely. Centrestage changed that boy.”*

Volunteer 5

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### 4.3.3 The longer-term impact

This study was not set up to report on the longer-term impact as it only spanned a couple of months. However, by interviewing people in Ardeer, where the project and food provision have been in place for a couple of years, some of the longer-term impact was noted. The local volunteers felt that they had seen a vast difference, in terms of the area but also to them personally. They felt that the project was helping to address leisure poverty in the area, building hope and aspirations, and bringing people together to reaffirm a positive sense of identity as a community. They even had their own song that they sang at each of the family days, *Raise Your Voice*.

*“When I was growing up at the bottom end, we didn’t have any Centrestage and there was nothing, in my time, there was nothing there for the kids at all, so they were all bored and hanging about the streets or always fighting or drinking and all that. So when Centrestage came in, it was seen as a great new venture for the kids now and they’ve got something to do, and they do shows. So ... it’s great.”*

Volunteer 4

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The volunteers reported that they had grown in confidence and thus were open to new opportunities. A young woman said that ‘speaking to you now would have been torture to me a year ago.’ As a result of her newly-found confidence she was going to college, something she admitted would have seemed impossible before.

These individual changes also benefit the community, with young and old engaging and new relationships forming. A woman said she now had a family through Centrestage and she would do anything for them. A volunteer and a worker admitted that they had changed through the support, from being an angry individual to a much happier person.

*“Yeah, I was terrible, I was a different person, I wasn’t the bubbly me that everyone likes.”*

Interviewer: *“So what do you think has made that change for you?”*

*“People showing me kindness, school they didn’t show me that, they showed me that they were in charge and they can do what they want. Here these guys showed me there’s two paths to life, you can choose a fighting path where it gets you nowhere or you can choose this path that gets you a lot bigger and brighter places.”*

Volunteer 7

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Centrestage workers felt that seeing this transformation in individuals was a privilege.

*“It’s so important to us, as well, as a team, like, to see the changes. Like, it’s so exciting to see, watching the difference, and watching the relationships form. It’s, you get a real thrill from it.”*

Manager 6

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The goal set by Centrestage is that in every community where there is food provision, they will eventually exit from the area, with the local community providing their own self-sustaining service. In this light, Centrestage’s role is to be a catalyst for individual and community action and wellbeing, hence the full name of the programme - *Centrestage Catalyst Communities*. By creating new spaces for interaction and community-making, the organisation seeks to nurture and sense of belonging and possibility.

*“It’s about community, it’s a place to go, it’s a place to belong ...we did say for years that Centrestage isn’t the place, it’s the people, but by doing the food piece, by going into Ardeer, we realised that had I not had the range and diversity of people that I have here, I couldn’t have taken forward the Centrestage methodology, but people needed a place to come that wasn’t judgemental ... I think it’s going to be food first which is actually cool. But, really aspirational food and potentially a restaurant ...but it’s that place to belong. That sense of nobody knows why they’re coming, they’re just coming to Centrestage because you belong.”*

Manager 1

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All in all, this section has shown that Centrestage has considerable impact on the areas where it operates. The organisation is helping people to take steps towards getting help and, through the relationships established, reveal the extent of their problems and link to



appropriate services. It is also bringing people together to create or rebuild communities so that they can develop local solutions.

### 4.5.3 Challenges for Centrestage

The following section presents challenges reported or identified during the research. They are categorised as relating to community, process, organisation and external factors. The main challenges in the community are that barriers to engagement remain and other local services could be more supportive.

Challenges related to process are to do with the 'health of the bus' and meeting the demand and growing need for food provision. In the first few months the organisation had already given out more than the number of meals it had predicted for the year. As a result, the team has been under pressure and it was felt that communication could be better and roles made clearer. Whilst this evaluation was underway Centrestage was already putting in place systems to address this. For example, proposing workers shadow others within the team to understand their role.

Another key challenge is to prevent 'burn out' and Centrestage was in the process of setting up what the team members refer to as a 'circle of support' and implementing a strategy for protecting the wellbeing of the team. This sets out ways for workers and management to support one another, to maintain boundaries, understand and deal with limitations, and be more self-aware about their physical and mental health. Centrestage is also looking at its revenue to assign more staff to the project and recruit more volunteers.

The external challenges are that, through this work, Centrestage is uncovering harsh truths about some services that don't seem to work well. Knowing what to do with this information, handling it sensitively and not endangering partnership working constitute real challenges.

#### a) Community challenges

##### **Barriers to engagement**

One of the main challenges is that there are still people who are not reached by the project; younger people aged between 18-25 years old, and men in general, were less visible during fieldwork. It was felt by staff and volunteers that there could be more done by people in the community, or local champions to 'spread the word'. Centrestage is also considering going out to people's doors and thus taking 'reaching out' to another level. For younger people it might be worthwhile considering using social media as a means of making contact.

Reaching out in the traditional sense may be worthwhile but also has limitations. On a quieter than usual morning, a worker and a volunteer went out with bags with meals for a couple of days. They knocked on doors and tried to speak to people to make them aware. However, they returned within an hour as they said that the reaction from the local people

was one of distrust and they thought they had stolen the food from the supermarket. There are also questions about whether ‘knocking on doors’ may go against the ‘dignified transaction’ ethos that defines Centrestage’s food provision (i.e. people chose to approach the bus and to accept the ‘pay it forward’ basis).

The reality is that the Centrestage bus, and the way in which this project is carried out, may not appeal to everyone. This limitation means that getting help to all who need it requires a range of approaches. The shame and self-blame that people carry and, in turn, the critical attitude of wider society to those who are most deprived, are major barriers and not everyone will be attracted to this type of initiative.

*I think some people are scared to come because it is like pleading poverty and they don't want to.*

## Volunteer 2

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For some, despite Centrestage’s stealth approach, to come to the bus may mean that help is needed and to step beyond the shame takes bravery (Garthwaite, 2016b). Volunteers admitted that even those who were closest to them did not know that they were in need. Over the course of the weeks, it became apparent that the volunteers also need food and take it away; but even they were sometimes ashamed about it:

*We gave food bags to a volunteer and she was so funny about it. I asked what she wanted and she wouldn't say. The workers know that she is in real need because she revealed to the Centrestage worker that up until a week ago she didn't even have a bed. (Notes, 20<sup>th</sup> May)*

## Lack of local support

It was noted that although in some of the areas the bus parks outside the community centres, these centres were not used. Centrestage wants to have a more joined-up approach with the local community and there are signs in Rankinston that this might happen. However, workers reported, and observations suggested, that support within community services, such as community centres, could be better. For example, in Ardeer the family nights that take place within the community centre are without any help from the centre itself. These issues are illustrated in the following notes:

*At one point we had ran out of spoons and I opened a drawer where there were a few. I was told to close the drawer as these spoons belonged to the community centre. I couldn't understand this mentality as this was the community and surely therefore the spoons should also be used by them! Very strange. (Notes, 18<sup>th</sup> May)*

*"I'll say give me ... spoons. They go, oh, we will, yes, absolutely. So, the spoons will be there next week but something else will have gone until we manage to*

*get Boards revisited or we get asset transfer. But, our community is not in that place yet that they could run a business, but over time they will and that's why I'm here."*

Manager

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*The teachers who worked in the school all came out to get into their cars and the Centrestage worker ran across and sang 'Welcome to the Centrestage bus.' They all laughed but most hurried to their cars. One teacher came across and asked for more information. She was really impressed and said that she would tell the parents. It is interesting how the other teachers simply did not engage. (Notes, 27<sup>th</sup> May)*

Clearly, there is room for improvement in building understanding, relationships and connections from both sides, including how Centrestage may better link up with established local groups and other organisations, including mainstream services. For this to happen, Centrestage staff may need support to further develop skills to work in partnership with others.

### **The reality that a very small number attempt to abuse this system**

It was very rare, but nonetheless reported, that there were people who came to the bus and tried to abuse the system. Therefore, having 'insider knowledge' from volunteers, so that a truer picture can be established, can help to safeguard against this. Nevertheless, as the following quote illustrates, staff and volunteers wield considerable power when making difficult judgement calls:

*A woman approached the van with her own bags and I asked how many, she said seven. I watched the volunteer put together the equivalent for three and I said 'Do you not need to give more than that' to them quietly. They replied 'She isn't getting for seven, they only have three in their family.' I asked 'How do you know she isn't getting for other people too though?' She said 'You can't judge, I know, but I know.' (Notes, 19<sup>th</sup> May)*

There are risks in instances like this, where 'insider knowledge' may introduce veiled judgement calls on who may be 'deserving' or 'undeserving' of different levels of help. As noted earlier, mitigating such risks requires that Centrestage continues to develop as a community of purpose where staff and volunteers can share emerging dilemmas and reflect on ongoing practice.

## b) Process Challenges

### Keeping pace and meeting demand

Forty-two weeks into the food provision project, Centrestage has given out 140,440 portions across the areas that were the focus of this study, exceeding what they expected to accomplish in the first year. This has put a strain on staff and staffing levels are currently being revised. In order to meet the demand, more workers are needed and the management is also reviewing revenue streams.

### The 'health' of the bus

Throughout the report we have illustrated the importance of spaces and artefacts. One of the main challenges ahead relates to the reliability of the bus. There have been ongoing problems with the bus engine and the fact that it is an old vehicle and requires constant repairs.

*At around 2pm the bus' generator broke down, we had to move the food into the sitootery and it had to return to the garage. Everyone seemed down about the bus and there is so much worry and pride that goes into the vehicle.*

*(Notes, 17<sup>th</sup> June).*

### Legal barriers

To get this project underway Centrestage reported that they had to find a way around the legislation that restricts the use of surplus food. There are three health and safety officers assigned to this project and overcoming this challenge is evidence of the organisation's resilience and ability to find solutions.

*"We have found a solution to food poverty, you now need to find a solution for legislation to allow us to do it ... because we have starving children here, you don't want to be part of that, you want to help us. So, it's how do you reframe it to make people go on that journey?"*

*Manager 2*

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### Careful planning and management

A key challenge working as a volunteer is to resist the urge to give more.

*One woman approached to get food for her family and I don't know what came over me but I offered what appeared to be left-over cakes from Marks and Spencer. I found out that these were actually for the tea on Wednesday. I apologised ... It made me realise that in reality, the need is being met through careful management and if this isn't managed well then people don't get what they need. (Notes, 21<sup>st</sup> May)*

This project requires careful planning and management. All workers are advised to give out enough food for two days. One day the food had run out quickly and all felt that they had let the local community down. The Centrestage team made the lengthy trip back to the main kitchen and took meals out to the families, but made a vow that 'running out' should never happen again. They now monitor the food throughout the day and if it seems they may need more food they act quickly.

### **Retaining dignity**

Centrestage is attempting to develop ways of providing support that is dignified. For example, management is clear that as far as possible there should be no queuing at the bus. For the sitootery, the blinds are closed a little so that those inside don't feel exposed. It is these details that matter as well as the importance of giving a donation –the 'pay it forward' approach which creates a transaction based on reciprocity and solidarity.

*A man approached on crutches ... He had a handful of change and was insistent that he wanted to give it into the box. He left with bags for the week without going on to the bus and there was a clear feeling that he wanted to contribute, no matter how little. (Notes, 19<sup>th</sup> May)*

## **c) Organisational Challenges**

### **Maintaining boundaries and preventing 'burnout'**

Centrestage workers recognised that part of the success of this project is that they all give a piece of themselves. When they are on the bus it is intense and you have to be 'on' at all times, listening, engaging, and interacting in an enthusiastic, compassionate and genuine way. A key challenge in conducting such intense emotional labour is to prevent 'burnout' and Centrestage was in the process of setting up what they refer to as a 'circle of support' and implementing a strategy for protecting the wellbeing of the team. This sets out ways for workers and management to support one another, to reflect on boundaries, understand and deal with limitations, and be self-aware about their physical and mental health. All felt that having their own family support, as well as being able to speak with fellow workers was really important.

*"The work I've been doing with the guys is a recognition of there's some things you just can't change, why would you put all your energies into something that's not going to happen for you, put your energies into a place that you can influence. But as part of that there's another wee feeder, and it comes off the strengths as well, so we've done quite a lot of work around wellbeing with the guys ... so a recognition of need to look after yourself, need to look after your physical, your psychological, your mental wellbeing."*

Manager 3

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The challenge is to understand personal limits and be able to leave this work at work, which may be easier said than done.

*“The stories you're hearing, I mean, I can shut off from it, because I'm thinking how do I fix it, how do I fix it? My face is saying, oh my goodness, tell me your story. But, my brain is just thinking ... need to fix it, need to fix it, you know. So, I go home at night I forget, I just shut off and that's ... I work as long as I need to but I never take it home, I refuse.”*

*Manager 1*

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*The need here is great and when Jim cried my heart broke. This was a man who did not cry easily and was affronted by his own public display of weakness. Yet, in this weakness he had shown strength, the need to admit that he needed others. He was so thin, I felt so sad afterwards and yet you have to pick yourself up. I said to X and X later that in this job you must protect your heart, be resilient. I don't know if I could do this job for too long. I think the injustice of it all would really get to me. (Notes, 19<sup>th</sup> May)*

## **Communication**

During the research it transpired that there could be better communication in some parts of the organisation, particularly between the bus and kitchen teams. All interviewed felt that this was an issue that should be solved in time, possibly by doing other people's work so that they can understand better what is happening on either side.

## **The challenge of measuring success**

The quantifiable aspects of this project - for example, the number of meals cooked and provided - constitute a limited indicator of success. Being able to study the deeper and longer-term impact on these communities may require tracking individuals and local areas while adopting a longitudinal approach.

*“How do you measure success? Not everyone sees things the same ... Like I know from being out that what we are doing is making a difference, an immediate change to someone's health.”*

*Manager 2*

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*“What do you do? How do you quantify somebody just feeling quite happy? So, you look, there's some of the women that are in the marquee all the time, they are the women from the Evolve group, who are going to have a huge*

*role to play ... But, they were just so undervalued in themselves, they still have real issues with it."*

Manager 1

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There are aspects that will remain elusive to any study –although we have shown that some of the complex fabric of this kind of initiative can be illustrated through narratives built on qualitative data.

#### d) External challenges

##### **Uncovering truths and what to do with this information**

Centrestage staff are clear that a lot of this work is about helping people to come forward and reveal the true extent of their vulnerabilities. For example, they are working with young people who have been excluded from school and they feel that sometimes they are revealing situations when services are not working well. Similarly, the food provision programme can reveal the shortcomings of mainstream services in the area. It can be challenging to balance this critical perspective with the need to build relationships and engage in partnership with other organisations.

##### **Other services' way of working**

A theme that continually arose in the interviews was the view that services generally need to do more and adopt a 'can do' attitude, working alongside and with, rather than 'doing to' communities. Those areas where Centrestage has now established local champions and volunteers have proven to be invaluable. Research participants also strongly feel that in delivering a service it is important to identify each individual's strengths and help them to build on these rather than focusing on deficits. Some public services were perceived by interviewees as spending too much time filling in paperwork, talking rather than doing, and working from a deficits model.

#### e) The growing need

Centrestage workers are aware of the levels of poverty in other areas and want the project to be accessible to as many people as possible. Some felt that keeping this a 'stealth' project limited the amount of people participating in the food provision programme and this may undergo review.

As an example of recent expansion, Centrestage collaborated with the Council and purchased two giant inflatable buildings that were set up in two new areas, Onthank and Dalmellington. This offered food provision, as well as a summer programme of singing, dancing and cooking classes. It connected with, and supported, almost 4,000 people over the summer.



*Centrestage inflatable*

Overall, the biggest challenge is that there is growing need, both in terms of food provision and addressing the loneliness, hopelessness and isolation uncovered within these areas where many feel they have been forgotten. This project is able to disrupt perceptions about stigma by adopting a 'stealth' approach that reaches out to people who may not use mainstream services.

The challenge is securing funding to spread and sustain this approach and support these communities to the point when they can develop their own solutions.



## 5. Conclusions: Lessons for policy and practice

This report demonstrates that Centrestage is a relevant exemplar in the context of current debates on social justice, community empowerment and public service innovation in Scotland. This concluding section brings together key learning points and reflections that may help inform the work of service providers, funders and policy makers.

### 5.1 Tackling food poverty: upstream vs. downstream

Centrestage is one of myriad grassroots organisations addressing the dire consequences of growing inequalities in health, income, wealth and power in the UK and beyond (McCartney et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2016; Improvement Service, 2015).

The Centrestage dignified food provision programme operates downstream, dealing with the consequences rather than the causes of inequality. Upstream approaches, in contrast, place emphasis on tackling the root causes, for instance, through policies concerning housing, employment, welfare, education, health or the economy. Although the current momentum for the social justice agenda in Scotland is encouraging, upstream interventions can take time to come to fruition. In the meantime, service innovations operating downstream seem necessary to meet the complex challenges illustrated throughout this report.

In light of the growing need for food provision in Scotland, the Independent Working Group on Food Poverty (2016) emphasises the need for food provision to be dignified and inclusive. In terms of finding solutions, it states (2016: 4) that: ‘People with lived experience of food poverty must be at the heart of the change, and we must tackle food poverty in a way which enhances dignity and embodies respect.’ The report sets the goal of ending hunger and ensuring access by all people to safe, nutritious and sufficient food by 2030.<sup>6</sup> The Working Group note that the Scottish Government is committed to reducing food waste by 33% by 2025 (ibid: 35) and concludes by urging society to avoid complacency:

*There is nothing inevitable about food insecurity and hunger in Scotland. It can and must be eradicated. To do so will require energy and commitment. It will involve making sure that people have more money in their pockets, better food in their stomachs and feel more fully a part of a dignified movement that will strive together to end hunger in Scotland. (Ibid: 40)*

Centrestage, as we have shown, represents an insightful exemplar of such dignified movement at the service frontline.

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<sup>6</sup> Dignity: Ending Hunger Together in Scotland - The Report of the Independent Working Group on Food Poverty <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/06/8020>

## 5.2 How does Centrestage make a difference?

This study has sought to demystify the Centrestage approach by asking ‘how’ questions that render visible some of its key components. These are revisited below. Our overarching conclusion is that Centrestage offers a distinct approach to food provision by creating a social environment as well as a dignified transaction. The case demonstrates the importance of space and interaction when it comes to dignified food provision.

Centrestage started in 2006 building on a core idea: that anyone – regardless of age, background or experience – can gain life-changing social benefits through active participation in the arts, particularly music, drama and dance. Food provision was not part of the plan; the focus was on tackling other forms of social exclusion via performance, creativity, aspiration and hope. However, through its work it became apparent that ‘hope, expectation and confidence fade quickly on an empty stomach’ (McNeill and Weaver 2010:4). The dignified food provision programme thus grew as a natural extension of the organisation’s commitment to fostering individual and community wellbeing.

### 5.2.1 The ‘stealth’ approach

The most vulnerable and deprived in society are often the least likely to ask for help (Nugent 2015; Halsey and Deegan, 2015). As illustrated throughout this report, social attitudes, pressures and stigma can make people put on a public performance, while hardship remains hidden and need goes unmet. There is a belief that poverty is a consequence of personal failings. Consequently, shame ‘tends to be imposed indiscriminately on all who experience poverty’ and they, in turn, may internalise that shame thereby ‘risking social isolation, loss of agency, anger, depression, and despair that all compound the problems of managing with inadequate resources’ (Walker, 2014: 48). Moreover, shame

*is a very powerful self-conscious emotion that sometimes appears to operate by stealth, labelled as embarrassment, discomfort, shyness, or even as guilt ... shame binds societies together, for what is at stake is an individual’s continued belonging to the family, group, and culture ... The importance of shame to the collective is matched by its destructiveness for the individual ... Psychologists demonstrate that people experiencing shame not only feel small and humiliated, they are likely to experience social isolation which is either forced upon them, a form of exile, or chosen by them so as to avoid the possibility of public shaming. (Walker, 2014: 47)*

Centrestage has developed a stealth approach to combating stealth hardship. Staff and volunteers use the word ‘stealth’ to describe their work. They start from the realisation that the people they are working with can often feel ashamed and do not want to openly admit that they are in need. Therefore, to engage effectively, the operation must be tactful and dignified. In practice, this means that their emphasis is on ‘having fun’ – which characterises

all Centrestage activities, from music and dance groups to mobile food provision – and this helps to keep their projects appealing, engaging and dignified.

This is the essence of the stealth approach. People can join for fun, engage in community-making, and along the way get some of the help that they may need. As shown throughout the report, this ability to reach out, build trust, support and empower is crucial to how Centrestage goes about making a difference.

### 5.2.2 More than a foodbank

There are foodbanks in North and East Ayrshire but, as shown in this report, there are areas in dire need that remain beyond the reach of these services. These initiatives are often linked to religious organisations, which provides a context different to that of Centrestage. Typically, care professionals such as doctors, health visitors, teachers and social workers identify people in crisis and issue them with foodbank vouchers (see Lambie-Mumford, 2013). This usually entitles them to receive a foodbank parcel for three days, but does not offer cooked meals. For those not in contact with these professionals this type of access is not possible and those reluctant to seek help may be discouraged. In contrast, Centrestage travels to places where help is needed and provides packaged cooked meals, on a ‘pay it forward’ basis, to anyone who stops by. In doing so, as shown in the report, it reaches people who may not have access to, or want to use, a foodbank.

Food provision sometimes goes along other forms of support. Some foodbanks have a ‘flagging up’ system:

*‘If someone comes to a Trussell Trust foodbank more than three times in six months our system automatically flags that. Then we work with local agencies and charities to make a plan to help that person back onto their feet’.*<sup>7</sup>

Centrestage staff can be approached to ask for advice, support and signposting, but they also actively reach out to establish a relationship with individuals over time so that they feel comfortable to reveal the issues that they are struggling with.

There are other features explored throughout the report that make Centrestage food provision distinctive:

- The clever use of space and artefacts – fun, functional and inviting – to foster ease of interaction and a caring environment. The point is to create a positive experience as well as giving out food. This becomes about people coming to see friends and make friends in an inspiring social environment.
- Centrestage strives to bring people together, as well as working with individual cases, thus addressing isolation and loneliness on a long-term basis. People feel a

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2015/04/24/eleven-foodbank-myths-you-must-not-fall-for/>

part of something bigger, not only within their community but also the Centrestage community. This generates connections that can help to build social capital.

- Part of the retaining of dignity is giving people the opportunity to give a donation; the report illustrates how this 'pay it forward' approach helps to create relationships based on respect and solidarity.
- Centrestage staff cooks, and teaches people to cook, high quality meals. It is about developing skills, creating aspirations and broadening horizons, as well as meeting needs.

Finally, a key difference with mainstream services is that here food provision is framed as a transaction between equal parties as part of an ongoing relationship characterised by reciprocity.

### 5.2.3 Organisational culture – values in practice

Throughout this report we offer examples of how Centrestage turns values into practices. Our research found a strong organisational culture that permeates every aspect of Centrestage operations, and ongoing efforts to keep the team on the same wavelength as part of a community of purpose.

Four themes were particularly salient while exploring the Centrestage ethos:

1. A relentless ethic of care and compassion that guides interactions, innovation and problem-solving.
2. Radical inclusiveness, entailing a non-judgemental attitude and ongoing efforts to reach out to excluded groups and individuals. We interpret this as a manifestation of 'unconditional positive regard' for others which creates a foundation for relationship-building and reciprocity (Rogers, 1959).
3. A strengths-based way of working, where the aim is to help people to realise their potential, for example connecting them to opportunities for volunteering, developing skills or taking part in shows.
4. An emphasis on positivity and 'having fun', which translates into promoting a motivating and happy atmosphere.

We have also noted key components of the Centrestage modus operandi, including:

- **Flexibility and adaptability.** The organisation is highly responsive to its environment and capable of adjusting rapidly to meet emerging challenges.
- **Continuous learning and improvement.** Peer-learning and ongoing reflection underpin a drive to improve strategies and everyday practices. This is crucial in turning knowledge into know-how.
- **Creativity and improvisation.** The artistic foundation of the organisation provides a strong platform for innovation and imaginative problem-solving.

As argued in the report, this amounts to a form of creative pragmatism that allows Centrestage to be resourceful despite lacking resources. This underpins the organisation’s knack for meaningful transformations, e.g. supplies into meals, artefacts into spaces, services into relationships.

In terms of structure, the organisation is increasingly being flattened to promote a form of ‘facilitative leadership’ that is distributed across all levels. Facilitative leadership takes place when leaders (at management and frontline level) prioritise collaboration over command and control, thus acting as facilitators whose job is to mediate and negotiate amongst competing ideas, interests and agendas in order to reach agreements and make things happen (Escobar, 2014: 21). Senior staff are seen as inspirational role models who encourage workers to take control and act on ideas; they provide guidance, support and a sounding board. The way Centrestage recruits resembles more the development of a local movement galvanised around common purpose, than the standard hiring practices of a conventional service. In this sense, people working for Centrestage are mobilised rather than recruited. Overall, what we found is a strongly value-laden organisation nurtured by value-based practice and acting as a catalyst for a growing community of purpose.

### 5.3 What difference does Centrestage make?

The infographic to the right presents information on the number of recipients, food provision, activities and volunteers, as well as the predicted figures from the outset, and the actual and now future predictions for the rest of the year in terms of provision. This highlights the level of need revealed and gives an insight into the frequency and breadth of what is being provided.

The report explored in detail individual and collective outcomes over the short, medium and long term. We illustrated how these outcomes take place, albeit our research was not designed to estimate their frequency. Our aim has been to document stories that help to put flesh on the bones of the quantitative data from other strands of the broader Centrestage evaluation programme.

We organised those stories around a range of core outcome themes, including:

- Alleviating hunger
- Fostering human contact



- Helping to break down barriers in taking steps towards help
- Providing something to look forward to and thus addressing leisure poverty
- Challenging individual and social perceptions and assumptions that lead to stigma
- Transforming the immediate area by creating a vibrant and supportive community space
- Addressing underlying problems, talking through issues and offering or signposting support
- Building ongoing relationships that generate knowledge to inform effective action
- Enabling direct changes in physical and mental wellbeing
- Creating unique experiences, building aspirations and providing opportunities to broaden personal and collective horizons
- Supporting families
- Building or helping to re-build communities, establishing or reaffirming a positive local identity
- Brokering connections and developing social capital within and beyond the local area
- Fostering community empowerment by supporting local people to set their own priorities and develop local services.

On the whole, Centrestage has a substantial impact in these areas. Our research shows that, as well as alleviating hunger, the organisation provides emotional support and a place for people to socialise, build relationships, open up about their situation and get help or connect to appropriate services. It also works to build or re-build communities and ultimately foster collective action so that local people can develop their own solutions.

#### **5.4 Scaling-up: barriers and enablers for spread and sustainability**

In the academic literature, ‘scaling-up’ usually means ‘delivering or enacting an innovation in a way that increases the number of people benefitting from it while ensuring the original design’ is maintained (Shiell-Davis et al. 2015:5). A review of the literature on scaling-up innovations highlights the following as typical barriers to the process:

- Scaling-up an innovation is complex, with many moving parts that need management and attention
- A lack of understanding due to different perspectives and visions is problematic
- Resources and stakeholders’ energy must be taken into account
- Reluctant partnership working can be detrimental

Our research outlined local, process, organisational and external challenges for Centrestage, some of which resonate with the barriers above. These challenges need attention to consolidate and spread the approach.

Firstly, despite Centrestage's success in addressing unmet need, there are people whom the organisation has still not reached. This will require further development and creativity, and we have noted that the organisation is aware of this challenge.

Secondly, there is room for improvement in collaborating with other local organisations and services and increase synergies by pooling ideas and resources in partnership. Thirdly, we have documented substantial challenges regarding the very process of food provision. Namely, keeping pace to meet growing demand; maintaining the infrastructure (i.e. the bus); legal hurdles; and managing scarce supplies.

Fourthly, the organisation faces internal challenges that may become greater as the project scales up. For instance, there is room for improvement in terms of communication between kitchen and frontline staff. Centrestage is in the process of setting up opportunities for shadowing and has regular team meetings in place. The demanding nature of the job also means that there is the potential risk of burnout for staff and volunteers. Centrestage is in the process of setting up what they refer to as a 'circle of support' and implementing a strategy for protecting the wellbeing of the team. This sets out ways for workers and management to support one another, to reflect on boundaries, understand and deal with limitations, and be more self-aware about their physical and mental health. They are also looking at their revenue to try to assign more staff to the project and recruit more volunteers.

Finally, Centrestage works with people whose testimonies and situations can reveal the failings of some other services, and thus faces the challenge of forging collaborations with other organisations while remaining a critical partner.

The organisation is taking steps to address some of these barriers and, as illustrated throughout this report, seems equipped to find solutions. Shiell-Davis et al. (2015:13) review of the literature on scaling-up outlines the following enabling and success factors:

- Pairing the innovation and original sites to the settings in terms of compatible goals, objectives, values, and population characteristics is critical.
- Scaling-up an innovation needs large amounts of time and commitment.
- Communication needs to be as clear and direct as possible, and happen frequently between all partners and stakeholders.
- People's expectations and perceptions help to shape the scaling-up process.
- Involving as many groups of stakeholders as possible from a very early stage in the scaling-up process helps with buy-in and influence.

These considerations should help to guide Centrestage's strategy for expansion. The research has explored a range of core qualities that chime with the enablers above. For example, we found a strong organisational culture bound by common purpose, unyielding commitment and continuous peer-learning. Centrestage has grown steadily over time and its current achievements are linked to successful team development.

It also demonstrates know-how in adapting to different contexts and tailoring the services to local priorities and circumstances. The creative pragmatism illustrated through the report shows the resourcefulness of the Centrestage community in the face of scarce resources.

We also found examples of ongoing collaboration with other organisations, and we have seen how the food provision programme develops groups of local volunteers who are also service users and shape strategy and frontline work. Finally, Centrestage works on the basis of facilitative leadership distributed across the organisation and its networks, which has been shown to be crucial in spreading and sustaining innovation (Shiell-Davis et al. 2015: 1).

In terms of ensuring sustainability, some further messages from Shiell-Davis et al. (2015: 18-19) review are relevant here:

- Determining the balance between fidelity and adaptation is difficult but necessary, as too much rigidity can result in incompatibility but too many changes can reduce the innovation's effectiveness.
- Monitoring and evaluation need to be ongoing throughout the scaling-up process.
- While planning and strategy are critical, the non-linear nature of spread means that not all dynamics and consequences of an innovation can be planned for in advance.
- Collaboration, networking, information exchange and using existing knowledge are critical.
- Scaling-up innovations can take an emotional, mental, and physical toll on people.

All in all, the starkest challenge is the growing need for the service, which stretches Centrestage as it currently is and raises questions about the scope for spread and sustainability. For example, Centrestage receives surplus food from Fareshare, but as we have observed, its usefulness is reduced at times, and Centrestage has to cope with unpredictability and fund fresh supplies.

The 'pay it forward' model, however, offers some encouraging signs in terms of contributing to sustainability (e.g. £18,360.71 in the first nine months across the areas that were the focus of this study). The organisation is also currently discussing with local suppliers their ability to provide surplus food and they are starting to collaborate with one wholesaler. Nonetheless, these contributions may not be able to fill the gap to meet growing need and wider connections and support are required.

But existing research from a range of fields seems to give good odds for consolidating and spreading the Centrestage approach: 'Innovations that explicitly address an identified problem, an under-served population, or emerging issues are more likely to be scaled-up' (Shiell-Davis et al. 2015: 10).

To conclude, Centrestage's exit strategy must also be noted. The organisation was not set up to provide food, but to use the arts to advance individual and community wellbeing. However, the realities of food poverty have become so pressing that Centrestage, like many other organisations, has been compelled to spring into action. Central to its approach is the



notion that the organisation acts as a catalyst in communities, seeking to stimulate and support local initiative. Accordingly, Centrestage's goal is to eventually exit from the areas where there is food provision, with the local community providing their own self-sustaining services. Centrestage's role is thus to be a catalyst for individual and community action and wellbeing, hence the full name of the programme, *Centrestage Catalyst Communities*.

## 5.5 Conclusions – social justice, community empowerment and public service innovation

The 2011 Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services has become the landmark reference for public service reform in Scotland, establishing four principles for effective and sustainable services. Firstly, to empower individuals and communities receiving public services by involving them in the design and delivery. Secondly, that public service providers work more closely in partnership, to integrate service provision and thus improve outcomes. Thirdly, to prioritise expenditure on public services which prevent negative outcomes from arising. Finally, that the whole system of public services must become more efficient by reducing duplication and pooling resources wherever possible.

Public service reform is about more than the public sector, and Centrestage provides an example of how the third sector contributes to advancing the Christie agenda. Throughout the report we have illustrated how it contributes to empowering individuals and communities to be part of their own service, involving them in the design and delivery. We have also shown examples of effective partnership where the organisation collaborates with other services (e.g. NHS; clothes banks). Despite being a 'downstream' approach to tackling food poverty and social exclusion, the report has demonstrated how Centrestage's work can prevent further deterioration in people's wellbeing, and improves opportunities and life chances by addressing shame and neglect. At the moment, efforts appear split between meeting immediate need and attempting to address underlying issues through advice and specialised support. In terms of performance, we have noted the organisation's ability to effectively maximise scarce resources.

As a grassroots organisation, Centrestage is playing an important local role in progressing the community empowerment agenda in the areas where it operates:

- Meeting basic needs to enable individuals to engage in community life.
- Developing people's confidence, self-belief, and agency, which are *sine qua non* to participation.
- Brokering local connections and solutions.
- Developing social capital and community capacity.
- Rebuilding community identity based on dignity and respect.

A clear example of Centrestage's catalyst role is the Ardeer Hub, where community members are pursuing charitable status with a view to creating a social enterprise that will make their food provision self-sustaining as well as develop other services. As noted earlier,

Centrestage views their exit from the local areas as the best indicator of success, and fostering the creation of new 'community anchor organisations' (Henderson, 2015) is key to that strategy. This 'catalyst' role is crucial, as there are clear disparities in the readiness of disadvantaged communities to make the most of the new possibilities opened by the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act. In this light, the catalyst role of organisations such as Centrestage becomes instrumental.

The lessons drawn out in this report invite reflection about the shifting role of the public sector in the context of developing a more 'enabling state' (Wallace, 2013). Centrestage brings a distinct approach to some of the most pressing challenges at the service frontline, and our conclusion is that it deserves a fair hearing unbridled by the constraints of conventional policy thinking. 'Wicked' social problems require upstream interventions, but also downstream innovative responses that may look and feel very different from standard emergency services. Funders and policymakers face the challenge of finding ways of creating supportive and authorising environments where evidence-informed innovation can thrive.

We conclude with some lessons that may help to move in that direction:

- The importance of developing creative ways of addressing unmet need. The cornerstone of Centrestage's services is to create a positive social environment as well as a dignified transaction. We have illustrated some merits of the 'stealth' approach, but there is scope to gain a better understanding by studying similar examples in other contexts.
- Spreading and sustaining the work of organisations such as Centrestage requires ongoing support and collaboration across the third, public and private sectors; the scope for synergies is perhaps as great as some of the barriers to forging viable partnerships.
- Centrestage shows the importance of developing new forms of facilitative and distributed leadership capable of building strong organisational cultures that galvanise highly motivated communities of purpose.
- It also exemplifies the power of 'unconditional positive regard' for making a difference to the lives of the most vulnerable in society. There is much work to be done to disrupt and eventually alter the status quo of assumptions and stigma around poverty and social exclusion within and across communities, and in society at large.
- Funding and policy communities must combine a focus on both upstream and downstream action. There is much to be done at policy level to tackle and prevent the root causes of inequality. In the meantime, organisations such as Centrestage play a key role in attenuating the dire consequences for citizens and communities.

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