

Key Messages



Rising Food Insecurity in times of COVID-19

A joint online event on Zoom by Public Health Scotland Food Insecurity Working Group and Voluntary Health Scotland took place on the 4th June 2020 with 31 registered attendees.

Background:

Food insecurity has been an issue for a significant proportion of Scotland's population for many years and COVID-19 has caused the issue to become further entrenched.

Public Health Scotland (PHS) was established on 1st April 2020. Both PHS and VHS have programmes of work to mitigate health inequalities.

- PHS has developed a Social Mitigation Cell which captures effective responses and develop guidance on how to minimise negative health responses caused by COVID-19 and increasing food insecurity.
- Previous [research](#) by VHS drew on information from 143 of members which highlighted a number of issues surrounding a lack of access to food.

PHS and VHS both recognise there is a need to engage and collaborate across the third sector to identify interventions which are tackling - not just food insecurities - but health inequalities more widely. This further online Zoom discussion involving 28 participants focussed on 4 key areas:-

- identifying who the vulnerable groups are;
- recognising what is working on the ground, for example, different activities, actions by supermarkets, different types of partnerships;
- equally finding what isn't working; and
- determining long-term action might be required to mitigate pre-existing food insecurity as well as that which has resulted because of COVID-19.

Summary

The message from the third sector organisations participating is that they had quickly assessed the needs of their communities; adapted their way of working quickly; and found others to help. Food insecurity was the catalyst but inequality more generally impacted communities' and individuals' ability to cope. This was not a time for bureaucracy or waiting for Government advice to be cascaded down. It was imperative to overcome hurdles fast – because lives depended on it. Where there were already existing partnerships, these were utilised: but others were created without delay. The role of volunteers was essential. Creative ways of working are still being developed. All were proud of the sector's response and hoped this proves a turning point in the ways of working with the public and private sectors – not least because a 'return to normal' for society may be a long way off.

Contributions

Kiren Zubairi, VHS Policy Engagement Officer, chaired the meeting and outlined the 4 key areas for discussion. Bill Gray, PHS was invited to update participants on the work of PHS about food insecurity.

PHS established on 1 April 2020. Bill's team has long-standing connection with the food insecurity agenda and the closely related topics of poverty, child poverty, mental health etc. However, with lockdown, it is proving a challenge for the component parts of PHS to connect up the wide range of skills embedded in the new organisation, including Information Services Division and Health Protection Scotland.

PHS currently preparing a 3 year strategy plus some Senior Management and Trustee posts yet to be filled. Household food insecurity will remain on agenda. Key issue is getting intelligence on the ground back to the Scottish Government. The e-bulletin is now weekly. PHS aware that Glasgow Centre for Public Health looking at food inequalities issue through a COVID-19 lens and keen to share via VHS network.

PHS value greatly the work VHS has been doing on this topic to engage third sector the hope is that, moving forward, PHS and VHS will continue to work together.

The meeting was then opened up for discussion on experiences during present crisis around food insecurities. These Key Messages provide a brief summary of what was an engaging and wide-ranging discussion.

Voluntary health organisations

- 1. LOVE Gorgie Farm:** Working in partnership with other local organisations including Big Hearts and Tynecastle High, charity set in place a completely new food delivery service. Food donations from variety of sources plus wealth of volunteers to act as delivery drivers helped service get off to quick start – 24 March, day after lockdown. No bureaucratic system. Simple one stop referral system created using expertise of many local groups. Reached out too via social media, Local Press. Service reaching people never before on benefit system who are suddenly unemployed. Deliveries now across Edinburgh and Lothians.

- 2. Scottish Poverty & Inequality Research Unit Glasgow Cal Uni and Scottish Poverty & Inequality (SP&I) Commission:** Update on rapid research for the SP&I Commission to be published on 8 June 2020 giving sense of national picture on food insecurity. Grateful for quality and depth of narrative of responses from third sector. Big picture indicates working well re resources and pride among third sector in its response. Looking ahead though, concerns around worker well-being and stress; expected increasing demand; future funding; impact on core business; and question if everyone being reached. Research will have 12 recommendations. Meantime, Commissioners hearing messages from organisations that new ways of working must not be lost. Also important to learn from failure. Brexit will bring future challenges re food sustainability for Scotland so need to use learning from this crisis. Commissioners will follow up research by writing to Scottish Government. The [research](#) has now been published.
- 3. Home Energy Scotland:** HES keen to support those receiving food parcels with 'in-home' advice and pre-payment vouchers. 12 organisations involved in Energy Redress Scheme distributing vouchers. Discussion around the Heat and Eat dilemma facing families.
- 4. Faith in Community Dundee:** Very positive description of response to crisis by local grassroots projects working with Dundee Voluntary Action plus Local Authority, police and local businesses. Parcels and advice now reaching 4,500 people per week. Highlighted different issues including costs; lack of cooking skills; lack of transport so reliance on local shops; loss of drop-in cafés etc. Use of What's App as enabler. Food Directory created. Various pockets of funding been found and micro grants being made. This is seen as new way of innovative working, not just firefighting.
- 5. Rowan Alba:** Charity found that many of their client group had no access to the internet or were running out of electric or phone credit. Also messages around shielding were causing confusion. Charity supporting clients to make the connections needed to other organisations. Some individuals were eating better as receiving cooked food and additionally they felt cared for by simple act of kindness i.e. volunteer dropping off food and saying hello. Food is a connector. View is that the community sector must be allowed to continue this positive way of working and not just during a pandemic.
- 6. Positive Health HIV:** Charity had always promoted healthy food but added in fresh fruit/veg and tried to personalise parcels. Existing volunteer drivers doing food deliveries. Worked together with Food Coalition Edin. Some clients no previous link with social work and some anxiety/confusion at first re shielding letters.
- 7. NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde:** delivering small number of emergency food parcels. Food insecurity seen as linking to other issues around individuals including child poverty and transport.

8. Government Zero –driven forward by Snook and Nominet – very quick successful UK campaign to enable free data access to NHS websites during crisis.

Other points made:

- Participants supported the hope that the new ways of working being led by the third sector were catalyst for change.
- A need to learn lessons now should another similar crisis appear in future. Whole system thinking approach set in scenarios e.g. actions in first 2 weeks; first 6 months; beyond 6 months etc
- Need for new thinking. Example given of Scottish hospitality business being in crisis where staff unemployed and traditional school leaver destination gone. Yet the staff have skills and expertise needed within communities where many struggle with healthy eating and cookery skills. Suggested there be synergy to be explored and supported financially.
- Acknowledged that special diets (physical or mental health, religion, culture etc) were not really given consideration in the first food parcel deliveries.
- View that the principles of dignity and respect needed to underpin actions. Discussion of the role of food as a social experience – if lockdown sustained further (or repeated) how will this social ‘cement’ be protected?
- Food starting to be functional though some instances of local communities coming together – socially distanced VE Day, coffee mornings.
- Crisis has brought into sharper focus that, whether rural or islands or city setting, it is not good to be poor. Uneven patterns of community engagement around Scotland means some areas underserved by local support while others have been well managed.
- This goes beyond issues of food insecurity – wider issues of inequality - for example the digital agenda where some funding has been provided by Scot Govt to help those shielding.



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