



FOUND WANTING

Understanding journeys into
and out of food insecurity:
a longitudinal study

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FOREWORD

On the pages that follow you will read about situations which should be unthinkable in rich Scotland. About people going for days without eating while others take the awful decision between paying for food, power or rent. About parents going without food so their children don't go hungry. About people's sense of shame at having to ask for help. And about the stress and worry created by a lack of reliable access to food. But, very far from being unthinkable, these situations are the ugly reality unfolding, right now, for too many people in our communities. We cannot turn a blind eye to them.

Food insecurity is avoidable and, with it, so is the need for emergency food aid. We could decide to take the steps needed to end the need for food banks. In theory, it is a decision the UK and Scottish Governments have already made. By pledging to deliver the UN's Sustainable Development Goals they have promised to end hunger by 2030. However, amid ever-rising food bank use, we are woefully off track. The human price of this failure is immense and morally unjustifiable in a country in which food is plentiful.

To tackle food insecurity, nothing is more important than an adequate and secure income. We have long known that action is therefore needed to bolster the social security safety net and to ensure work genuinely protects people from crisis through action, including by employers, to improve the quality of work. However, to date, a fuller understanding of the lives of those facing food insecurity in Scotland has been missing. This research seeks to help plug that gap by engaging with – and listening to – people facing food insecurity to discover how their circumstances change over time. Our intent was clear: we wanted to identify how people's substantial personal efforts towards a life free from hunger, and the fear of it, can be better supported by actors operating across the public, private and third sectors.

In this report, we give deliberate prominence to the words of those we spoke with. We are hugely grateful to them for sharing their experiences.

What they told us was deeply personal and often painful. Despite food and social security being basic human rights, some consider themselves as somehow undeserving of support. For many participants, a lack of money to buy food is one challenge amongst many. It interacts with, and exacerbates, wider issues from ill-health to homelessness, debt, bereavement, and caring responsibilities. Three-quarters of participants reported some form of mental ill-health, a finding that underscores the need to consider food insecurity as a public health emergency.

Right now, despite claims of political commitment, we are failing to protect too many people. We can surely do better. We must. Encouragingly, people's experiences of food insecurity are not carved in stone, with many participants in this research reporting their circumstances had improved. Where this has happened, people credit the timely and empathetic support they received from a variety of public and third sector services, with reports of staff going the extra mile to help. They also highlight the critical role played by family and friends, as well as the positive impact of community spaces where people come together to share a meal, and to chat; challenging the loneliness and sense of isolation reported by participants.

Amid people's struggles, there is incredible resilience: people are working hard to overcome often complex challenges and system failures. A consistent theme is the importance participants place on being treated

with respect and dignity. These are not unreasonable expectations, yet – based on this research – they are too often unmet. Participants describe social security systems which are meant to protect people are instead imposing unrealistic expectations upon them or placing unnecessary hurdles in their path. In doing so, opportunities to prevent people falling into a crisis are missed. Equally, the findings shine a light on the precarious nature of the labour market; moving in and out of temporary work often results in people moving in and out of severe food insecurity too.

Ending hunger for everyone in Scotland will need action from multiple actors – by government at all levels, by those delivering public services, by employers, and by the third sector – some of whom may not yet fully recognise the part they will need to play in this collective effort. We hope the journeys captured help inform interventions which prevent people ending up without the money they need for food. We do not claim to answer every question, or identify every solution, but the findings deserve the fullest attention of all those who want to end food insecurity in Scotland, and across the UK. Only by acting together can we honour the honesty and bravery shown by those who shared their stories by ending hunger for all.

Project Board, A Menu for Change



ABOUT A MENU FOR CHANGE

A Menu for Change: Cash, Rights, Food is a partnership project, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, and managed by Oxfam Scotland, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, The Poverty Alliance and Nourish Scotland. The project, which was established in 2017, is a response to the growth of emergency food aid and the levels of hunger in Scotland over recent years. In many ways, the project takes forward recommendations of the Independent Short Life Working Group on Food Poverty as contained within the 2016 report Dignity: Ending Hunger Together in Scotland ¹.

This research project has been delivered by A Menu for Change as part of a wider programme of activities which aims to: improve policy and practice responses to food insecurity; reduce the need for emergency food aid; and better understand and address the root causes of the problem. More information and publications from A Menu for Change are available at www.menuforchange.org.uk

THE WORK OF A MENU FOR CHANGE HAS INCLUDED:

- Working with local partners to improve food insecurity policy and practice in three local authorities – Dundee, East Ayrshire and Fife;
- Supporting local people and organisations to pilot new initiatives to better tackle food insecurity, with a focus on how to prevent it;
- Bringing together different groups from across Scotland to share best practice in responding to food insecurity;
- Researching the scale, drivers and experiences of food insecurity to better understand the problem and how to address it; and
- Using our experience, learning and evidence to influence local and national policy change.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Food banks have expanded rapidly across the UK in recent years, prompting researchers, policy-makers and politicians to examine and debate why so many people are struggling to put food on the table.

While previous studies have focused largely on the impact of the short-term income crises which lead people to turn to food banks,^{2, 3} this research takes a longer and more holistic view of people's circumstances to better understand the contexts in which severe food insecurity has emerged. The study also explores how people's circumstances change following an experience of severe food insecurity. This in-depth, longitudinal research offers a new perspective on food insecurity in the UK.



By taking a qualitative, longitudinal approach, this study aims to:

- understand the journeys which lead people to severe food insecurity;
- understand how the circumstances of people facing severe food insecurity change over time; and
- identify how both crisis responses and preventative solutions to food insecurity can be improved.

The research was conducted in three different local authorities in Scotland: Fife, Dundee and East Ayrshire. Interviewees were recruited via food aid providers, advice services, the Scottish Welfare Fund, and other community settings. First, 40 individuals were recruited for an interview who had recent (during the previous two weeks) experience of acute food insecurity (having no money for food). Twenty-two took part in a second interview four to six weeks later, and ten were interviewed for a third time a year later. The fieldwork took place between December 2017 and April 2019.

KEY POINTS

The findings of this longitudinal study provide valuable insights into the lived reality of food insecurity. The research shows:

1. Food insecurity has considerable physical, psychological and social impacts on individuals and families;
2. Shame is a key barrier to those seeking help in a crisis, and the nature of support provided can make a significant difference to a person's outcomes;
3. Inadequate and insecure incomes from work and social security are the key triggers for food insecurity;
4. Failures of existing social security and wider public services leave people with adverse life experiences acutely vulnerable to food insecurity;
5. People with ill health and caring responsibilities are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, which in turn makes managing these situations even more difficult; and
6. People make use of informal networks and non-specialist services to help resolve financial challenges driving food insecurity.

The findings of this study have clear implications for the development of preventative solutions to food insecurity and better crisis responses, including the need to:

- Ensure adequate and secure incomes;
- Improve dignified access to cash and advice in a crisis; and
- Deliver holistic, empathetic public services which treat people with kindness and respect.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

THE PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF FOOD INSECURITY



“I went three days without food and I literally, I was close to collapsing in the street”

Philip, Dundee

- Hunger, going days without eating, was a strikingly common experience for interviewees in this study. Such severe food insecurity was found to affect interviewees’ physical health, including reports of weight loss, dizziness and stomach problems.
- The findings point to a close relationship between financial difficulties, food insecurity and mental health. Food insecurity left interviewees and their children socially isolated, extremely anxious, depressed, and at times, even suicidal. Improvements in financial security, and therefore, food security appeared to lead to improvements in mental health, while extended periods of financial difficulties had a detrimental impact on the mental health of participants in this study.

- Struggling to afford to feed themselves and their families made it very difficult for interviewees to look beyond their immediate needs or plan for the future, often having to make difficult choices between eating, heating their homes, or paying rent.



“Anxiety, never knowing when your next payment or next meal’s coming fae”

Duncan, Fife

EXPERIENCES OF CRISIS SUPPORT

- Asking for help was often a source of shame for interviewees when struggling to afford to meet their basic needs. Some reported feeling undeserving of help and chose not to seek out support despite experiencing extreme need.
- Just over half of the stage one participants (22 of 40) had received at least one Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) award in the past. Interviewees’ experiences of the SWF point to the value of being able to access cash in a crisis. Some reported positive experiences of empathetic decision-makers and receiving awards quickly. Others reported that negative past experiences of the SWF had put them off applying. Examples were also given of excessive requirements to provide evidence of financial difficulties exacerbating

experiences of crisis. The most common reason given for not applying to the Scottish Welfare Fund, despite considerable financial difficulties, was that they had already received three awards in the past twelve months and had been told they were not eligible for any more awards.

- Most stage one interviewees (35 of 40) had experience of using a food bank both in cases of one-off crisis as well as for on-going difficulties affording food. However, interviewees described strong feelings of shame associated with having to access them, feelings which did not diminish with repeated use.
- Food aid services, particularly community café type settings, which provided opportunities for socialising and for engaging with support and advice services, appeared to have a very positive impact on some participants in the study. However, not everyone had easy access to or felt comfortable going to such services.



“I hate asking for help, ’cause other people need help too.”

Natalie, Dundee

FOOD INSECURITY TRIGGERS AND TRANSITION POINTS

- Interviewees' experiences emphasise the dynamic nature of food insecurity and its close relationship with income. Participants commonly reported having moved between varying degrees of severity of food insecurity as their incomes fluctuated over time.
- Sudden drops in income or complete loss of income were key triggers for quickly becoming severely food insecure and being unable to meet basic costs like rent or heating. These changes often led to the accumulation of rent arrears and debts, extending the experience of food insecurity.
- Many common triggers for severe food insecurity related to the insecure labour market. These included: a sudden loss of hours on a zero-hours contract; coming to the end of a temporary contract and a lack of basic employment rights such as sick pay.
- Several interviewees reported having stopped work for health reasons; two cited this transition as the trigger for becoming severely food insecure.
- Moving on to Universal Credit from work or other benefits and having to wait at least five weeks for a payment, was a common trigger for severe food insecurity. Interviewees were often reluctant to

take out advance payments because they had to be repaid. Deductions on subsequent payments to pay back advances, rent arrears and other debts, often extended the experience of food insecurity as incomes were insufficient to cover basic needs.

- Disability benefit reassessments, having benefit levels downgraded or removed altogether also triggered food insecurity through a loss of income for some interviewees.



“My partner’s always in and out of work, that’s always just temporary contracts, getting paid off, and it’s never like permanent, you don’t know if he’s gonna’ go in today and come back without a job”

Harriet, Fife

THE WIDER CONTEXTS OF FOOD INSECURITY EXPERIENCES

- The findings highlight that critical events and transitions, including: bereavement, childhood abuse, homelessness, leaving the armed forces and leaving care, often formed the background to food insecurity experiences. The long-term psychological and emotional impacts of these experiences, combined with failings in the housing, social security and employment systems, appeared to leave interviewees vulnerable to food insecurity.
- Most research participants reported some sort of long-standing health condition, with 29 of the 40 stage one interviewees reporting mental ill health.
- Poor mental health clearly exacerbated, and was exacerbated by, food insecurity.
- Many of the research participants had considerable caring responsibilities. The experience of food insecurity made it difficult for interviewees in this study to fulfil their caring responsibilities, while the lack of adequate support for caring arguably exacerbated the difficulties which interviewees faced in affording to meet their basic needs. This was particularly the case for the lone parents in this study.



“I was my dad’s carer. Constantly, twenty-four seven. And then when I lost my dad, and I just went in tae depression, and everything just kinda fell in”

Blair, East Ayrshire

EVIDENCE OF CHANGE OVER TIME

- Improvements in interviewees’ food insecurity status and general wellbeing were attributed to improvements in financial circumstances. Such improvements included the resolution of problems with benefits, for example, having disability benefits reinstated or receiving back payments after winning an appeal on a benefits decision.
- With greater financial security came improved mental and physical health - interviewees reported feeling more in control of their finances, less anxious and better able to plan ahead.
- Moving into work increased incomes and helped improve self-esteem for some. However, the insecure nature of the labour market as experienced by interviewees in this study suggests that the benefits of moving in to work may only be temporary.

- Negative change over the research period was often the result of prolonged periods of financial hardship which compounded existing difficulties such as rent arrears. Extended periods looking for work had a particularly negative impact on participants' mental health.
- It was often through informal networks or services, rather than those specialised in advice provision that interviewees received help to resolve financial and other problems. This included help from other service users or staff in community centres, nurseries, and health care settings.
- Interviewees' experiences point to the importance of holistic, person-centred approaches to service provision and treating clients with dignity and respect to help achieve positive change.
- The findings suggest that a lack of timely, accurate advice can exacerbate food insecurity by creating additional barriers to accessing sustainable incomes.



“She came into the café, and that was when I was about to get evicted ... And she helped me out with loads of things. She did do a lot, like really to get things in place... after four years it’s finally got sorted”

Jenny, Dundee

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT:

To ensure adequate and reliable incomes as a preventative strategy to address food insecurity, the UK Government should:

- Restore the value of key benefits and uprate all benefits in line with inflation, thus supporting people to meet their living costs and help build resilience to income shocks;
- Improve the incomes families receive from social security by removing the two-child limit and benefit cap;
- Provide better support for people who develop ill-health to remain in the labour market, and protect them from income crisis when they are unable to do so;
- Improve job security by banning exploitative zero-hours contracts and enforcing compliance with minimum employment standards among employers and recruitment agencies;
- Increase the National Living Wage to the Real Living Wage.

Beyond the need for wide scale reforms to ensure everyone has a sustainable income, the findings of this report highlight the importance of improving the current system to enable social security payments to serve as a responsive and reliable safety net. An improved system should recognise current insecurities in the labour market so that when people transition onto or between benefits, adequate protection is in place to prevent a change in circumstances from causing people to fall into crisis. To achieve this, the UK Government should:

- Eliminate measures that create shocks to consistent income, including removing the five-week wait for initial Universal Credit payments entirely by making advance payments non-repayable;
- Further reduce the maximum level at which deductions are made from Universal Credit payments so that incomes always protect people from destitution⁴;
- Improve communication received from the DWP and Jobcentre Plus offices so people know why payment decisions have been made and how they can challenge a decision;
- Improve the quality of employment support and end in-work conditionality so that people are better equipped to gain sustainable work.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT:

While much of the power to improve the incomes which people receive through work and income replacement benefits lies with the UK Government, there are actions the Scottish Government can take to help ensure everyone in Scotland has an adequate income and can afford the food they need. These include steps to:

- Ensure the new Scottish Child Payment achieves its objective of reducing child poverty⁵ while recognising the groups in need who will miss out on this help, and work towards new support which would help protect all households from food insecurity;
- Use public sector procurement to deliver fair work and invest in low paid sectors to drive improvements in working conditions while ensuring initiatives to promote good practice amongst employers in Scotland are sufficiently robust and well-resourced to achieve this objective;
- Ensure devolved employability programmes are designed to provide person-centred support to those furthest from the labour market recognising the significant barriers individuals face, including those with caring responsibilities;
- Invest in welfare rights advice and advocacy support services and increase their availability via public services and in community settings;
- Enshrine the right to food in Scots law to give enhanced day-to-day effect to this international human rights law in Scotland, and then inform and empower people in Scotland to claim this right;
- Invest in community services which provide food in conjunction with access to wider advice and support services as part of social activity; and
- Explore the role of income smoothing services to reduce vulnerability to income shocks

This report provides specific learning on the role of the Scottish Welfare Fund as a source of crisis support. To strengthen the Scottish Welfare Fund as an effective safety net in a crisis, the Scottish Government should⁶:

- Embed the principles of dignity and respect, as contained in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, in the delivery of the Scottish Welfare Fund;
- Increase investment in the administration budget to improve the capacity of local staff to provide timely and holistic support to applicants, referring them to advice services where appropriate;
- Ensure the Scottish Welfare Fund is sufficiently advertised so people know when and how they can access it;
- Ensure people always have access to cash in a crisis by reviewing the guidance which suggests limiting support to three awards in a 12-month period unless exceptional circumstances apply; and
- Increase the programme budget – the money distributed to claimants – in line with the anticipated increase in demand created by enhanced knowledge about the Scottish Welfare Fund and the removal of barriers to access it.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT, LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND OTHER PUBLIC BODIES:

The findings in this study highlight the relevance of food insecurity to a wide range of services and the importance of a holistic, person-centred approach to service design and delivery to improve people's outcomes. We see evidence of the new Social Security Scotland Agency adopting this approach, which considers people's wider needs and welcome this. In this context, there is a role for the Scottish Government, local authorities and other public bodies to:

- Embed principles of investment, dignity and respect throughout public services and proactively communicate a rights-based approach to service delivery;
- Encourage cross-sectoral working on food insecurity, recognising its relevance to health, social care, housing and advice service design and delivery and the importance of holistic, person-centred ways of working;
- Improve referral pathways between statutory, voluntary and community services, so people have ready access to welfare rights advice and income maximisation opportunities; and

- Invest in the availability of welfare rights advice and advocacy support in community-based settings and via public services like schools and GP surgeries, drawing on the evidence of life events that increase vulnerability to income crisis.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS:

There are also clear steps which employers should take to protect their staff from food insecurity, including:

- Paying at least the Real Living Wage to all staff;
- Ensuring all staff have guaranteed hours and predictable rotas;
- Ensuring high levels of employment standards and that all staff are aware of their rights;
- Providing agency workers with the right to request direct employment after 12 weeks; and
- Making welfare rights advice available to staff so they know what they are entitled to while in work and understand the options when a job contract ends.



FINAL THOUGHTS

This research provides new evidence of the drivers of food insecurity for people living in Scotland today, and the often profoundly debilitating impact this has. By foregrounding their voices, it also demonstrates the humanity and determination of people for whom such severe difficulties are often a daily reality. This longitudinal study also identifies that positive change is possible and that food insecurity is preventable.

The recommendations outlined in this study are specific actions which can be taken now to end food insecurity. Such steps would help Scotland deliver on its commitment to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal Two - Zero Hunger and to respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights. These actions are also crucial to achieving Scotland's national objectives as contained within the National Performance Framework, including the vision of eradicating poverty and hunger and ensuring resilient, vibrant communities. These changes can be achieved through a progressive taxation system that recognises public services and social security are an investment in the health and wellbeing of the people of Scotland.

In telling their stories and experiences, the participants in this study also shared their hopes for change and their messages to people in positions of power. It was common for interviewees to say they felt politicians and other decision-makers lacked empathy or understanding of the realities facing people experiencing poverty. It is hoped that this report will help inform those in power of these realities, provoke empathy, and inspire action. Henry explained his sense of the need for people at all levels to come together to achieve change:



“I wish I was in a high position, that my word went. But I can’t do it on my own...I have written to the council about my complaints. I’ve even written to one of our councillors. But then the councillors can’t do it on their own either. They need the rest of the country with them”

Henry, Fife

1 INTRODUCTION

Food banks have rapidly expanded across the UK in recent years, prompting researchers, policy-makers and politicians to examine and debate why so many people are struggling to put food on the table.

While previous studies have focused largely on the impact of the short-term income crises which lead people to turn to food banks,^{8,9} this research takes a longer and more holistic view of people's circumstances in order to better understand the contexts in which severe food insecurity has emerged. This perspective has been identified as missing from much of the existing research.² The study also explores how people's circumstances change following an experience of severe food insecurity. This in-depth, longitudinal research offers a new perspective on food insecurity in the UK.

Analysis of the findings identifies the longer-term financial and psychological difficulties, as well as the wider context of ill-health and disability, experienced by people facing severe food insecurity. From this broader perspective, the research points to the systematic and structural drivers of food insecurity, while also highlighting ways in which timely intervention by a wide range of services could have helped improve outcomes for the individuals who took part in this project.





By engaging with interviewees over time, the study also considers the different trajectories participants experienced – whether these were positive or negative, and the factors which were critical in enabling participants to take sustainable steps towards becoming more food secure or inhibiting them from doing so, over the research period. Key implications of this study for policy and practice are identified, and specific recommendations are presented.

Critically, the presentation of research findings in this report draws heavily on the words and experiences of the study participants. Detailed longitudinal case studies are included throughout the report, to provide insight into lived experiences and the impacts of food insecurity on real lives. By giving prominence to the voices of the research participants, it is hoped that their messages to people in power will be heard and acted upon.

STUDY AIMS

BY TAKING A QUALITATIVE, LONGITUDINAL APPROACH, THIS STUDY AIMS TO:



UNDERSTAND THE JOURNEYS WHICH LEAD PEOPLE TO SEVERE FOOD INSECURITY;



UNDERSTAND HOW THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF PEOPLE FACING SEVERE FOOD INSECURITY CHANGE OVER TIME; AND



IDENTIFY HOW BOTH CRISIS RESPONSES AND PREVENTATIVE SOLUTIONS TO FOOD INSECURITY CAN BE IMPROVED.

2 RESEARCH AND POLICY CONTEXT

Food banks have rapidly expanded across the UK in recent years, prompting researchers, policy-makers and politicians to examine and debate why so many people are struggling to put food on the table.



2.1 THE NATURE AND SCALE OF FOOD INSECURITY

A relatively marginal activity in the early 2000s, current figures indicate there are now more than 2,000 food banks providing parcels of emergency food aid to people in need across the UK.¹⁰ Between April 2017 and September 2018, almost half a million food parcels were provided in Scotland alone.¹¹ The growth in food bank use has been closely linked to the impacts of UK Government welfare reforms, most notably the sanctions regime and the introduction of Universal Credit, which have disrupted and reduced the incomes of people claiming out-of-work benefits.¹²

The growth in food bank use in the UK has also prompted researchers and policy-makers to consider the broader issue of food insecurity as it is experienced at an individual or household level. Indeed, cuts to social security, stagnant incomes, rising unemployment and increased costs of living have meant difficulty in affording food is recognised as a daily reality for far more households than the numbers of those turning to food banks.¹³

Food insecurity in this context is defined as the inability to access adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the anxiety that one will not be able to do so in the future.¹⁴ It captures the experience of having insufficient and insecure financial resources to meet basic needs.

The tools used to gather data systematically on food insecurity include a set of questions which determine the severity of food insecurity at the individual or household level as a self-reported measure. For example, the United States Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey Module is routinely used in household surveys in North America and elsewhere to monitor the levels and severity of food insecurity among the population.¹⁵ Food insecurity is recognised as ranging from mild (worrying about running out of money for food), through moderate (skipping meals or cutting back on food), to severe (going whole days without eating).



Food insecurity is important, because it is a powerful indicator of material deprivation.¹⁶ In the recent study of destitution in the UK, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) identified an inability to afford food as a key aspect of the phenomenon. Indeed, when examining the experience of destitution, food was found to be the essential item which destitute households most commonly lacked.¹⁷

In the UK, household food insecurity is not currently routinely measured. However, the 2017 Scottish Health Survey included questions on food insecurity.¹⁸ In this survey, 8% of adults reported that they were worried they would run out of food due to a lack of money or resources, rising to 20% among single adult households, and 21% for single parents.¹⁹ Other studies have also found these household types to be over-represented among those facing persistent poverty,²⁰ food insecurity and other forms of deprivation. A study of Trussell Trust food banks found lone parents and their children constitute the largest number of people receiving help from food banks, though single male households are the most common household type.²¹ Elsewhere, JRF research found the group most at risk of destitution in the UK to be young, single men.²² People with disabilities have also been found to be over-represented among food bank users, and mental health conditions are identified as particularly prevalent among those experiencing destitution.²³

Not only are people with disabilities and experiencing ill-health more vulnerable to severe poverty and food insecurity, international research has evidenced the significant impact which food insecurity has on health and wellbeing. Adults experiencing food insecurity are more likely to develop mental ill health problems and have difficulty managing chronic conditions,²⁴ while food insecurity in childhood has been found to have a long-term effect on physical and mental health.²⁵ UK research has also highlighted the significant impact of destitution on mental health.²⁶

2.2 THE DRIVERS OF FOOD INSECURITY

It is widely recognised that food insecurity is driven by low and insecure incomes which are unable to match the cost of living.²⁷ In Canada, where food insecurity is routinely measured, low income is consistently identified as a predictor of food insecurity, and studies have also shown that income and employment changes within households are associated with changes in the severity of food insecurity.²⁸ In the UK, the 2016 Food and You Survey identified adults with incomes in the bottom quartile and adults who were unemployed or economically inactive as significantly more likely to be food insecure than those with higher incomes or those who were working. However, people in work were also found to be affected, with 7% reporting moderate or severe food insecurity.²⁹

Living for extended periods on low incomes makes it difficult to withstand even minor financial shocks, with small changes such as delays in receiving benefit payments identified as causing people to fall into destitution or requiring help from a food bank.³⁹ Cuts to public spending, rising living costs and significant changes to the social security system over the past decade have been closely linked to increases in poverty and inequality across the UK.³¹ The benefits freeze, in place since 2016, has eroded incomes from working-age benefits, with people in poverty in 2019 on average £340 a year worse off as a result of the freeze.³² The two-child limit, which restricts child allowances in Universal Credit and tax credits to the first two children in a family, is predicted to push a further 300,000 children into poverty by 2024.³³ In addition, restrictions in housing allowances mean Housing Benefit and Universal Credit are less likely to cover claimants' rental payments fully. Given that those on low incomes spend disproportionately more on essentials such as food, when incomes do not keep pace with prices, they are forced to cut back on the basics, thereby being put at risk of hardship.

Universal Credit, the flagship policy of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, has been linked to increased demand for food banks and homelessness risks.³⁴ The new benefit is also predicted to push 200,000 out-of-work families into poverty.³⁵ The built in five-week wait period before initial payment, as well as payment delays caused by administrative

error, have been evidenced as causing increases in debt, arrears and extreme hardship.³⁶ While advance payments are available to cover the initial wait time, research among food bank users identified that these payments were often too low and the rate of repayments at unaffordable levels, leaving users struggling to meet their basic needs.³⁷ Universal Credit also brings increased conditionality compared to the previous system, with some people in part-time work expected to increase their earnings or look for additional hours to receive the benefit. It is reported that Universal Credit conditionality is being applied more strictly, with sanction rates higher than they were for Jobseeker's Allowance.³⁸

It has been widely evidenced that people with disabilities have been particularly adversely affected by welfare reforms, putting them at increased risk of hardship. A review of the impact of welfare reforms found families with disabled adults and disabled children have faced the largest financial loss in cash terms compared to any other household type.³⁹ The same report found people with mental health conditions have experienced higher rates of sanctioning, exacerbating their existing challenges.

Evidence from this study also shows that not only those reliant on income replacement benefits, but also people who are in work are increasingly struggling to make ends meet and are facing food insecurity. Four million workers now live in poverty, a rise of over half a million over five years.⁴⁰ It has

been widely reported that low-paid and insecure work, particularly for those working on zero-hours contracts or described as working in the ‘gig economy’, can leave people without sufficient income to cover basic living costs.⁴¹ Indeed, JRF has warned of a rise in ‘in-work destitution’, albeit from a low base.⁴²

Alongside the social security policy changes, which have a cumulative effect on household incomes, broader changes in public spending and policy priorities are likely to play a significant role in the rise of food insecurity. A decade of austerity-led policy-making has meant significant cuts in public sector spending, with cuts being felt more harshly in the most deprived areas.⁴³ As a result of dramatically reduced funding to local government, preventative services in key areas such as adult social care, child social care and housing have seen considerable cuts. For example, the New Policy Institute found that, in England, preventative funding to help people stay in their homes had fallen 46% between 2011/12 and 2017/18.⁴⁴ Concern has also been raised about the levels of spending on mental health services, waiting times for assessments and the capacity of services to cope with demand.⁴⁵ Reducing spending on preventative services has been linked to an increased demand for crisis support, including homelessness services, and to children being taken into care.⁴⁶

2.3 SOURCES OF STATUTORY CRISIS SUPPORT

The weakening of the social security system and the rise in insecure work, as evidenced above, has left people increasingly vulnerable to falling into financial crisis, unable to afford even the basics such as food. There are sources of statutory support available to people in urgent financial need. However, some of these have also been subject to significant reforms in recent years.

Hardship payments are reduced-rate benefit payments made to people who have had their benefits sanctioned and can evidence that they are otherwise destitute. Importantly, unlike hardship payments for Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) and Employment Support Allowance (ESA), under Universal Credit hardship payments made during a sanction period have to be repaid, currently at a rate of 40% of monthly Universal Credit standard allowances. Using Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) published data, Dr David Webster has calculated that the proportion of sanctioned Universal Credit claimants receiving hardship payments is far lower than under JSA or ESA. He concludes:

“many sanctioned claimants (probably a majority) under UC are having to live on even lower (often zero) incomes than they did under the previous sanctions regimes for JSA and ESA.”⁴⁷

Benefit claimants are also entitled to advance payments if they are facing hardship, either after making a new claim or because their benefit cannot be paid on the due date. An advance payment is also paid as a loan which has to be paid back from future benefit payments. Under Universal Credit, advance payments have been used to compensate for the five week wait for initial payments, as well as other delays and administrative errors. Given the evidence of the role of repaying debts in causing destitution, JRF concludes that the widespread use of Universal Credit advance payments “fuels on-going hardship”.⁴⁸

Another feature of the UK Government’s package of welfare reforms has been the abolition of the discretionary Social Fund’s provision of crisis loans and community care grants to people facing financial crisis. Responsibility for providing such discretionary welfare assistance was devolved to a local level in England. In the absence of sustained central government funding or support, crisis support spending has fallen by over 80% since 2011 in some areas, while 22 local authorities have been identified as no longer operating an assistance scheme at all.⁴⁹ The absence of local welfare assistance schemes in England has been linked to increased pressure on food banks to help people in crisis.⁵⁰

2.4 A NOTE ON SOCIAL SECURITY IN SCOTLAND

Given that this research was carried out in Scotland, it is necessary to highlight some distinct features of social security policy in this context. The Scottish Government has implemented a number of policies to mitigate the impacts of welfare reforms. These policies include full mitigation of the Bedroom Tax,⁵¹ and Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants delivered through the Scottish Welfare Fund.

Following the scrapping of the Social Fund at a UK level, the Scottish Government established a national welfare assistance scheme, the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF), using the £23.8 million Social Fund budget from the UK Government topped up by £9.2 million. The SWF is delivered by local authorities and based on guidance from the Scottish Government, underpinned by legislation.⁵² Data shows that food is the item for which by far the most SWF Crisis Grants are awarded, highlighting the extent to which people accessing the Fund are struggling to meet their basic needs.⁵³ While the SWF provides a vital lifeline for many, the need for it to be better resourced in order to meet demand effectively has been recognised.⁵⁴ Research by A Menu for Change identified varying practice in the delivery of the SWF across Scotland and also raised concerns regarding its capacity to support everyone who could be using it.⁵⁵

While control over the design and delivery of the main income replacement benefits resides at Westminster, the Scottish Government's powers over social security were significantly expanded by the Scotland Acts of 2012 and 2016. These new powers include control over the delivery of eleven different welfare benefits, which, at the time of their devolution, made up 15 per cent of the overall social security budget for Scotland. Social Security Scotland is a new agency established to deliver the devolved benefits on core principles of "dignity, fairness and respect".⁵⁶ In June 2019, the Scottish Government announced the introduction of a new benefit – the Scottish Child Payment – to be rolled out to all eligible children by 2022 which will increase incomes of low-income families by £10 per week.⁵⁷

The Scottish Government has also developed a number of strategies to respond to food insecurity. In 2015, an independent short-life working group on food poverty was commissioned, which made a series of recommendations to address the issue.⁵⁸ In response, the Scottish Government committed to consider enshrining the Right to Food in domestic law, a policy which is likely to be included in the forthcoming Good Food Nation Bill. Money has also been invested in local responses to food insecurity, via the Fair Food Transformation Fund, which is designed to encourage more preventative, holistic interventions.⁵⁹



3 METHODOLOGY

This research uses a longitudinal qualitative approach. Such a study typically combines repeat interviews with individuals over time, with the retrospective gathering of information from them about their past experiences.

Having people look back over time can provide insight into how they perceive and explain their experiences, while following people forward over time provides an opportunity to explore the changes that occur, consider how they arise, and analyse how and why there may be diverse outcomes for different members of a sampled population.⁶⁰

Specifically for this study, the longitudinal approach helps us to understand the ways in which people respond to and use social and welfare services, their experiences of the labour market, and the impacts which these have over time on their experiences of food insecurity and their outcomes more broadly.



3.1 PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

The fieldwork was carried out in three stages. First, 40 individuals were recruited for interview who had recent (during the past two weeks) experience of acute food insecurity (having no money for food). Participants were recruited from across three local authorities in Scotland: Fife, Dundee and East Ayrshire. These local authorities were selected because they were the locations for other activities of the A Menu for Change project. These areas provided a mix of urban, rural and semi-rural settings for the research, each facing high levels of deprivation. A range of services, including food banks, advice providers, the Scottish Welfare Fund and other community organisations, facilitated the recruitment of interviewees.

Four to six weeks after the first interview, all participants were approached for a second interview. A 50% retention rate was anticipated. However, slightly more interviewees than expected remained engaged, with 22 second interviews carried out (a retention rate of 66%). Third and final interviews were held a year on from the first meeting. Ten interviewees were re-interviewed for a third time (44% of the cohort from the second stage).

3.2 MEASURING FOOD INSECURITY

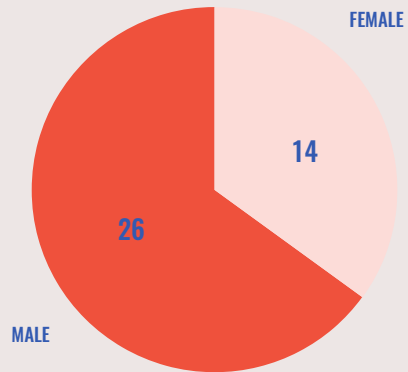
To measure participants' food insecurity status and track changes over time, an eight-question survey was used, modelled on the United States Department of Agriculture Household Food Security Survey Module described in Chapter Two. These questions were used to determine whether interviewees were mildly (worrying about running out of money for food), moderately (skipping meals or cutting back on food), or severely (going whole days without eating) food insecure. The questions were used at each interview to measure the change in food insecurity over time and are included at Appendix 1.

3.3 OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

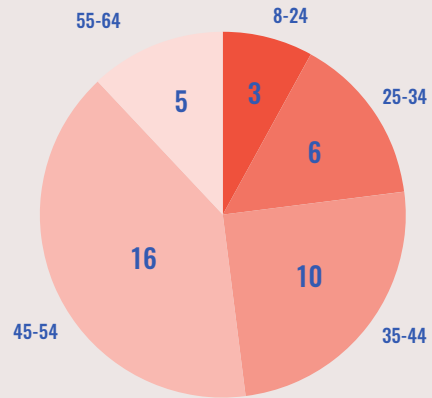
Interviewees with a range of demographic backgrounds were recruited for the study. The aim was to ensure the sample included a balance of: men and women; lone parent households; single person households; people in work; and those claiming out-of-work benefits. This was because these different groups are recognised to experience food insecurity differently, as discussed in Chapter Two.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE AT STAGE ONE

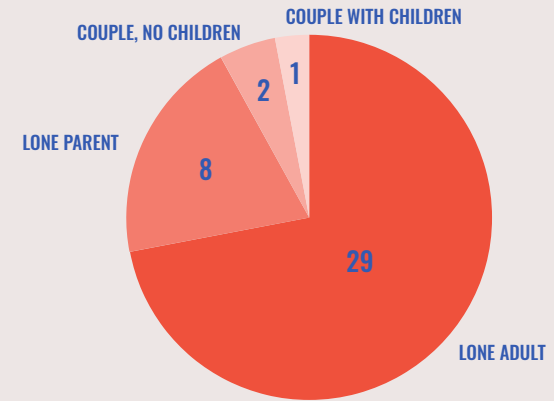
GENDER



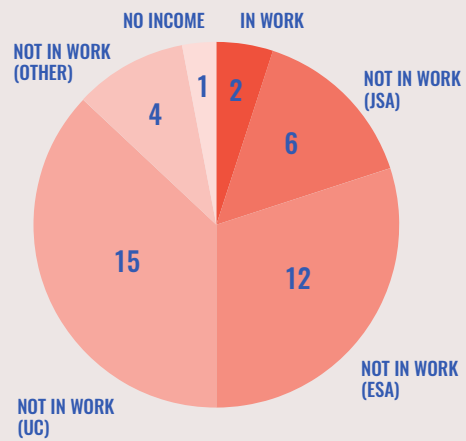
AGE RANGE



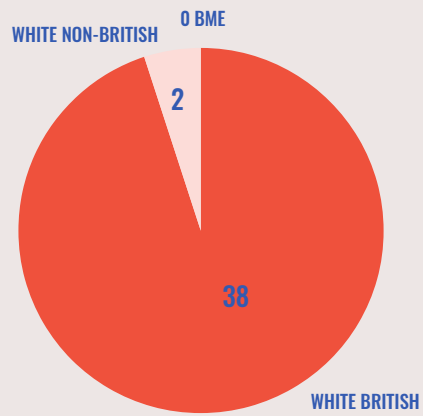
HOUSEHOLD TYPE



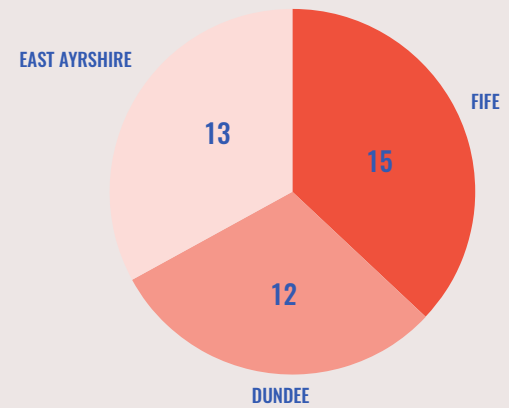
EMPLOYMENT STATUS



ETHNICITY



LOCATION OF INTERVIEW



3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The key principles of informed consent and anonymity underpin this research. Before each interview, individuals were provided with an information sheet, given the opportunity to ask questions and made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Written consent forms were used, and, at each interview, participants were reminded of the aims of the research and how their data was being used.

As a thank you for their time, £15 shopping vouchers were given to each participant at each interview. Interviews were held in a private space, either at the service where they were recruited or in the participant's home. Given the sensitive nature of the topics explored in the interviews, researchers carried lists of contact details for local and national advice and support services to offer interviewees where appropriate. Safeguarding procedures were followed.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data was stored securely and anonymously, in compliance with data protection regulations. Data was then analysed thematically using Excel and the online software package Dedoose. A procedure was adopted to help ensure consistency between the members of the research team involved in coding the data.



4

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS OF FOOD INSECURITY

This chapter considers the experiences of severe food insecurity, or food crisis, as described by interviewees in this study. It explores the physical, psychological and social impacts on the research participants and their families of being unable to afford sufficient food.

“I went three days without food and literally, I was close to collapsing in the street”

(Philip, Dundee)

4.1 THE EXTENT OF FOOD INSECURITY AMONG RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The table below summarises the levels of food insecurity among interviewees at each stage of the research. The findings show that, proportionately, the levels of food insecurity among the interviewees decreased over the research period. However, this may be because those in more chronically severe food insecure situations were more difficult to retain beyond the first interview. It is also notable that six of the ten individuals who were interviewed at all three stages remained severely food insecure a year on from the first meeting.

The longitudinal nature of this study encouraged interviewees to reflect on changes they had experienced over time, covering both changes in the periods between interviews and changes over the year prior to initial interview. From these reflections, it was clear that interviewees' experiences of food insecurity were not static. It was common for interviewees to report having moved between degrees of food insecurity as their income fluctuated over time. This was particularly the case for those who frequently moved in and out of temporary employment, as well as for those who had experienced changes in their benefits. Long-term income insecurity – not knowing when or how much you might next be paid – was a common experience for interviewees negotiating

INTERVIEWEES' FOOD INSECURITY STATUS AT EACH STAGE OF THE RESEARCH

	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3
INTERVIEWEES (N)			
	40	22	10
FOOD SECURE			
%	0	0	30
N	0	0	3
MILDLY FOOD INSECURE			
%	0	22.7	10
N	0	5	1
MODERATELY FOOD INSECURE			
%	17.5	13.6	0
N	7	3	0
SEVERELY FOOD INSECURE			
%	82.5	63.6	60
N	33	14	6

the temporary labour market and changes to the benefits system. Therefore, while there were times when interviewees had enough money to cover their basic needs, the worry about being able to afford food and other essentials was never far away. With chronic income insecurity came chronic food insecurity:

“Anxiety, never knowing when your next payment or next meal’s coming fae.”
Duncan, Fife

As well as constant uncertainty about the ability to afford food in the longer term, the experience of severe food insecurity – going days with no or very little food – was not a temporary ‘crisis’ experience, but something which many interviewees described having to cope with frequently or on an on-going basis over an extended period of time. Such experiences of food insecurity were found to have considerable complex impacts on the participants in this study. Ruth explained how feeling hungry became normalised for her:

“In the last twelve months, were you ever hungry but you didn’t eat because you didn’t have money for food?” - Interviewer
“I think your stomach kinda gets used to it.”
Ruth, Fife

4.2 THE IMPACTS OF FOOD INSECURITY ON PHYSICAL HEALTH

Reflecting on their answers to the structured food insecurity survey questions, participants provided important insights into the lived reality of severe food insecurity and its impacts on their physical health. Several interviewees described the acute experience of going hungry. For example, Philip, who had recently been made redundant, explained:

“I went three days without food and I literally, I was close to collapsing in the street.”
Philip, Dundee

Experiences of weight loss, dizziness and other physical symptoms brought on by long periods of not eating were described:

“I was starting to get dizzy spells. I was having this problem with the reflux acid, which means I was going to the dentist, and he said, have you been sick a lot? It’s ruined the enamel of your teeth.”
Hilary, East Ayrshire



“I’ve lost about two, three stone, and I can feel like my cheek bones ... and sometimes I feel dizzy as well.”

Geoff, Fife

It was clear that, for some interviewees, their experience of food insecurity had gone on for so long that it had become normalised. Some described strategies they had adopted for coping with long-term food insecurity, including regularly skipping meals. Jenny, a lone parent, commented that she would “go for a nap for lunch” instead of eating a meal at lunchtime.

While some interviewees reported having lost a lot of weight because they could not afford enough food, others felt they had gained weight because they could only afford very calorie-dense, processed foods. Participants commonly described restricted food choices, reliance on cheap, unhealthy food and not being able to afford the energy to cook proper meals. As Jenny commented:



“It was literally just the cheapest food and it was all just crap.”

Jenny, Dundee

Many of the participants in this study reported some form of disability or long-term health problem. Experiences of food insecurity were often highlighted as exacerbating existing health conditions, or making it more difficult to manage symptoms:



“When I’m able to eat properly, healthy, and regular, the bloated-ness kind of disappears and bladder and bowels are slightly better. But if it’s noodles for lunch and tea, it’s noodles for lunch and tea.”

Alison, Dundee



“Being a diabetic, you’ve got to eat when you take the insulin, and if you were paying your bills, there’s no way on this earth you would survive.”

Andrew, East Ayrshire

4.3 IMPACTS OF FOOD INSECURITY ON MENTAL HEALTH

As well as its effects on physical health, long-term food insecurity clearly had a huge impact on the mental health of participants in this study. Severe financial pressures caused considerable anxiety, and interviewees described the constant worry of being unable to pay bills and meet their basic needs. Falling behind on their rent and the threat of eviction were particular sources of stress highlighted by many:



“I’m worrying about things that I need tae really worry about, like whether I’m gonnae eat today or whether I’m gonnae pay a bill tomorrow.”

Hilary, East Ayrshire



“You’re sitting there, going ‘Jesus, that’s gonnae be hard to catch up. How can I pay that?’ [rent arrears] and then worry, worry, worry, and then the next thing, heid doon. Slumping about.”

Andrew, East Ayrshire

Alison, a lone parent with two disabled children, described the mental health impacts of having to ration limited food amongst her family:



“I’m having to choose that a meal that I have at lunchtime is a meal for one of my children at teatime. I shouldn’t be having to do that, which then obviously has an effect on my mental health.”

Alison, Dundee

Suffering from chronic pain, she also reflected on the close connection between her financial, psychological and physical wellbeing:



“When that income is removed, the stress factor is through the roof which then doesn’t help the pain management.”

Alison, Dundee

For many, food insecurity exacerbated existing mental health problems. Stress, anxiety and depression, often related to struggling to get by on a low income, were made much worse by severe financial hardship. Hilary, living alone and claiming Universal Credit, was very aware of the effect which not eating enough had on her mental wellbeing:

“Then you realise, because you’ve eaten, your mood lifts.”

Hilary, East Ayrshire

Alison made a similar reflection:

“If you’re eating better then your mental health’s better, it’s all round health benefit when you’re able to actually go tae the shop and buy food for yourself.”

Alison, Dundee

In some cases, the relationship between food insecurity and mental health appeared to represent a vicious circle, whereby the mental health impacts of financial stress and food insecurity affected people’s motivation and capacity to eat well. For Philip, in his late twenties and recently made redundant, the impact of severe food insecurity on his ability to function day to day, let alone plan for the future, was profound:

“At the moment it’s more survival than living ... it’s a big difference between actually being able to relax and do something, rather than trying to focus on getting to your next meal.”

Philip, Dundee

In many cases, experiences of severe food insecurity were found to have critical implications for mental health. It was not uncommon for interviewees in such circumstances to describe feeling suicidal:

“It gets to that embarrassing point of, dignity totally goes out the window, you know, ‘cause I felt suicidal more times than I had hot dinners, and that’s no joke.”

Alison, Dundee

“Lorraine [advice worker], turned roon an’ goes ‘No, Andrew, you’ve got tae eat’, ‘cause between me and you I thought morbid, I thought about going in the corner and forgetting about it all.”

Andrew, East Ayrshire

4.4 SOCIAL IMPACTS OF FOOD INSECURITY

Analysis of interview data in this study highlights the interconnected and compounding relationship between the physical, psychological and social impacts of food insecurity. The experience clearly affected family and other social relationships, as well as interviewees' capacity to participate in their communities or wider society. Not being able to afford to feed themselves or their families carried strong feelings of shame for participants. Many described not wanting to ask for help. While friends and family were very often the main source of support for people facing severe food insecurity, others felt too embarrassed to reveal the extent of their problems even to those closest to them. Hilary mentioned: "I'm too embarrassed to ask my daughter for anything", while Rose said that she would prefer to lie to her family: "so they dinnae ken I'm sitting without". As a result of these feelings of shame, longer periods of financial insecurity and deteriorating mental health often left people increasingly socially isolated:

“

“You sit in a house wi’ nae electricity for three days, and the curtains are shut, and any chap comes to the door, you do not answer that door because you are actually affronted, no’ having any electricity for to invite folk in.”

Andrew, East Ayrshire

Others described the impacts of struggling to get by on close personal and family relationships. For example, Philip explained why his relationship with his girlfriend came to an end:

“

“I did have a girlfriend and that ended at the start of January and it was mainly due to me never having money and me just stressed from being unemployed ... I was obviously unable to like do normal everyday things.”

Philip, Dundee

Duncan, who moved in and out of temporary work over the research period, explained how he had kept the extent of his food insecurity from his friends. He described their reaction when they learnt how much he had struggled, but Duncan explained why he had not wanted to ask for help:

“I was sitting wi’ pals of mine, and they were kinda laughing and then they realised I wasnae really hae’n a joke. And, they went, ‘What’s the least you’ve had for your tea?’ And, I went, ‘A tin of peas.’ They went, ‘What?’ I went, ‘I had a tin of peas, over two nights ’cause I had nae money. I had nae bread, nae milk. I never had nothing. And there was water in the tap, that was about it.’ And, that’s how much I struggled at that time. But, then, maybe I should’ve swallowed my pride and went to somebody. But, I wasnae gonnae go and do that ... They said, ‘You could’ve came to me.’ But, I’m like, ‘Well, I’m no’ gonnae bother and say, “Can I get something to eat off you?” It’s no’ really something you would say to somebody.”

Duncan, Fife

The ways in which food insecurity left children socially isolated were particularly highlighted by the parents, predominantly mothers, who took part in the study:

“When you’ve not got any money, staying in your house all day, every day, makes the day drag in, which doesn’t help your mental health... Me and the children have been very, very isolated over the last year because we’ve not had money to go out.”

Alison, Dundee

Alison was especially concerned about the effects of severe food insecurity on the wellbeing of her children:

“My son, throughout the whole of this, was scared to put the heating on. He was scared to put the light on. He was sitting in the dark. He’s not playing his computer. What else is he meant to do when he’s socially isolated? When there’s no money to go on a bus, never mind take him out for the day.”

Alison, Dundee

Food insecurity not only meant not being able to meet her family’s basic food needs, but also not affording simple treats which were felt to be important parts of childhood and family life:

“When things were on a level, it’s very, very sad to even say, he [her son] was just happy that we went for a hot chocolate and a muffin. Now that’s a simple thing. That is not doable anymore.”

Alison, Dundee

Alison’s story is presented in the timeline on page 43

From the perspective of several interviewees, food insecurity affected their capacity to meet their expectations of themselves as parents. For example, Geoff reported that, during periods of unemployment, he could not afford to spend money on his daughter or take her out on trips. This loss of family contact had a considerable impact on his mental health:

“Me and my daughter used to go everywhere. But now, I don’t have nothing like, so we can’t do anything.”

Geoff, Fife

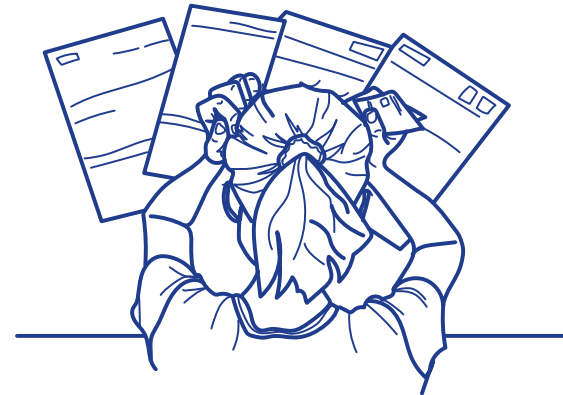
ALISON

AGE 35-44 LONE PARENT WITH TWO SONS, BOTH HAVE DISABILITIES

“ I’ve felt suicidal more times than I’ve had hot dinners and that’s no joke. ”



“I vowed I wouldn’t take out credit cards or loans. But you find you get gobbled up, you have to do it because there’s no other way”



BUILD-UP OF DEBTS



LOSES PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENT

JUNE 2016

“ You can’t hide the fact that there’s no food in the cupboards... Simon was scared to put the heating on, he was scared to put the lights on, ...He went to his cupboard and tried to kill himself. ”



SON’S DLA DOWNGRADED



LOSES CARER’S ALLOWANCE



SON ATTEMPTS SUICIDE



PIP REINSTATED



HIGHER RATE DLA REINSTATED

JANUARY 2019

“ It’s to take that feeling of isolation away from the children, it’s to take away the children having to worry that mum can’t afford to feed us, and that, “Oh, mum’s gonna have to go to a foodbank again”. ”

4.5 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings presented in this chapter highlight the extent, severity and impact of food insecurity experienced by the participants in this study. The acute experience of hunger was strikingly common, so much so that it had become normalised for several of the interviewees. Chronic difficulties in affording food were shared by many. The physical, psychological and social impacts of food insecurity on the individuals who participated in this study were closely connected and often shockingly severe. As well as its physical consequences, including weight loss, dizziness and stomach problems, food insecurity left interviewees and their children socially isolated, anxious, depressed and at times even suicidal.

There are obvious implications of these findings for social security policy, not least the need to ensure that incomes from benefits are secure and reliable, set at a level which allows people to meet their basic needs and provide guaranteed protection from crisis. As the findings in this study suggest, an absence of such security has severe consequences for the health and wellbeing of children and adults, placing additional pressures on health and social care services. Given the severe mental health impacts of food insecurity described by some interviewees, the findings raise particular questions regarding the adequacy of mental health services available

to people facing destitution. This adds to existing concerns about the ability of mental health services to cope with those in crisis.⁶¹

The findings particularly underline the close relationship which exists between financial insecurity, food insecurity and poor mental health, as identified by previous food insecurity and wider poverty research.⁶² In this context, it was clear that interviewees, not necessarily knowing when or how they would next be able to eat, had significantly diminished capacity to plan or look to the future. These findings highlight that expectations placed on people who are food insecure to look beyond their basic needs are unrealistic. Many of the interviewees in this situation were Universal Credit claimants and were expected to be actively seeking work. Their ability to comply with the requirements of this policy was clearly affected.

Reflecting on the impacts of food insecurity on her own resilience, Alison called for greater empathy from those in positions of power:

“If they could live a week or a month just with the bare benefits that they get given, to actually show them how difficult it is, or what they have to go through to actually try and survive or try and keep themselves motivated and fed and to make sure that they don’t break down. If they could do that themselves, then I think they’d understand.”

Alison, Dundee



5 SOURCES OF SUPPORT WHEN FACING FOOD INSECURITY

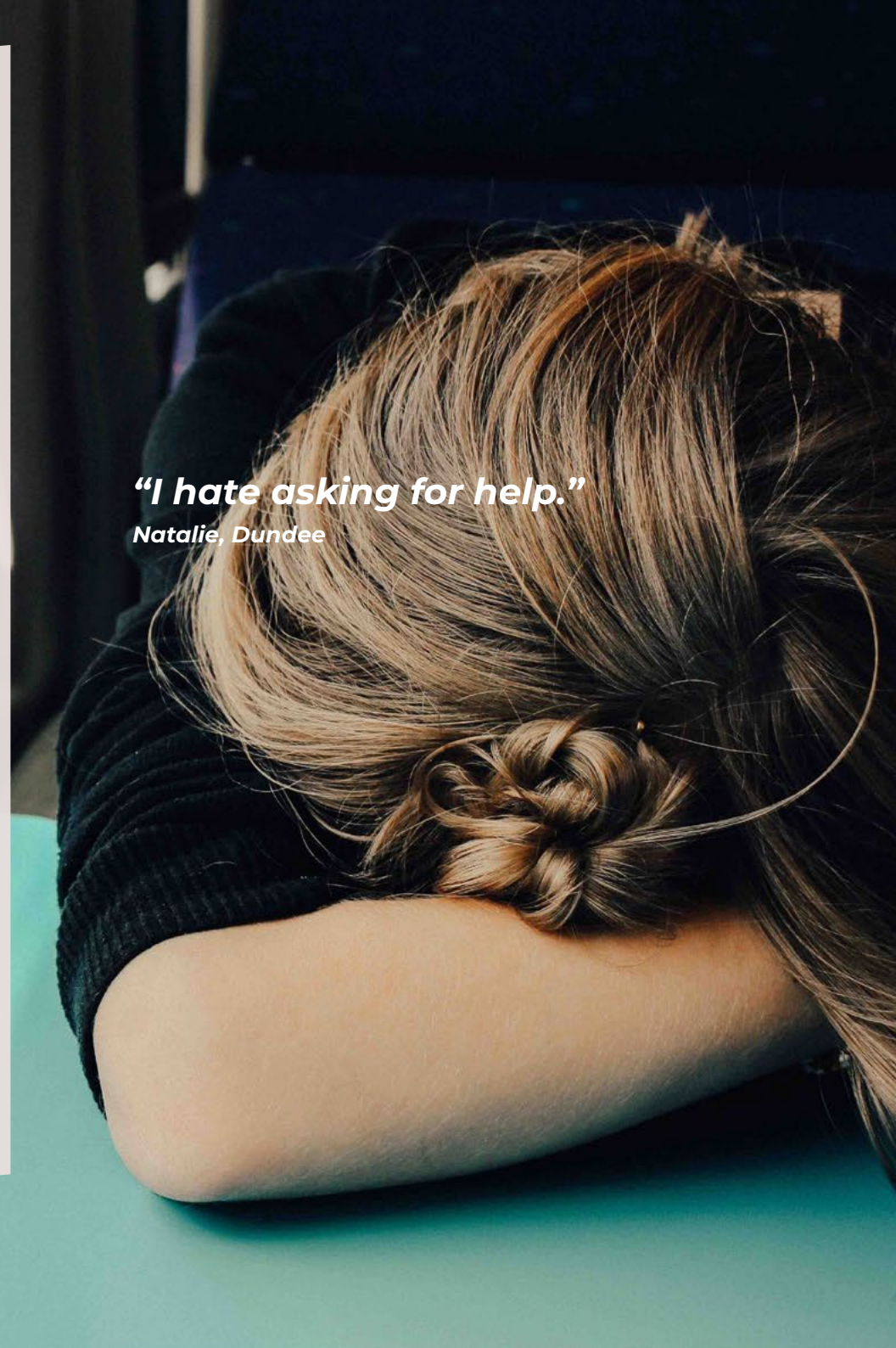
For many, the physical, psychological and social impacts of severe food insecurity described in Chapter Three created additional barriers to identifying or accessing appropriate sources of support.

This chapter examines interviewees' experiences of and feelings about seeking help when facing food crisis. Specifically, it considers their experiences of accessing food banks, their use of other forms of community-based food aid provision, and their experiences of applying to the Scottish Welfare Fund.

In light of the findings presented in this chapter, policy implications for improving the response to food crisis are identified.

"I hate asking for help."

Natalie, Dundee



5.1 TURNING TO FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Although many interviewees felt too ashamed to reveal the full extent of their financial difficulties, family and close friends were commonly the first port of call for those struggling to afford food. Some described borrowing money or food or going to family members' homes for meals in order to help keep costs down. Gordon, living alone, spoke about how his relatives helped to make sure he had food to eat over Christmas:

“They [parents-in-law] didnae get me a present as such – they actually gave me a big bag o’ food. Every week when they were dae’in their shopping, they were just picking up wee bits an’ bobs, putting them in a big box and then on Christmas they brought that doon for me.”

Gordon, East Ayrshire

Lesley, a lone parent with two children, also explained how family support helped her budget for food:

“I go to my mum’s for food sometimes ... And that helps a bit because that way I’ve not got seven nights’ tea to buy. I go round maybe two, three nights a week.”

Lesley, Fife

However, many interviewees also explained that they felt uncomfortable about asking for such support, aware that those they received help from often faced their own financial difficulties. Some reported that reliance on family members had put strain on those relationships. Interviewees also felt embarrassed at having to admit to those closest to them that they were struggling:

“You rely on your friends, but that – also, that is an affront ... That’s the way I am, I don’t want tae beg or something like that. It’s taken a wee while for me to come in here [the food bank] ... ’cause I’ve got an ego. And I don’t wantae burden my father anymair.”

Andrew, East Ayrshire

For others, turning to family was not an option:

“I don’t have any family support whatsoever, it’s just me and the kids.”

Kerry, East Ayrshire

Having to ask for help for food and feeling dependent on others clearly had a considerable impact on participants' self-esteem. Such feelings were also expressed in relation to accessing voluntary and statutory forms of crisis support.

5.2 USE OF FOOD BANKS

In the first stage of the study, 35 of the 40 participants (87.5%) had experience of using a food bank. At the second interview, eight of the 22 interviewees had accessed a food bank again in the six weeks since the first meeting. By the final interview, four of the ten participants reported having used a food bank during the intervening 10–11 months.

Of the initial 40, 13 (32.5%) interviewees were identified as frequent food bank users, reporting having accessed a food bank on at least three occasions, because of prolonged financial difficulties. For example, Helen, who had built up considerable rent arrears when on a zero-hours contract and then waiting for her first Universal Credit payment, found her monthly payments were not enough to cover her basic living costs. She used the food bank on at least a monthly basis and was hugely appreciative of the help she received, acknowledging that she would have struggled to eat without the food bank. However, like other participants, she expressed feelings of being ashamed of becoming dependent on it:



“I try not to go every week.”

Helen, East Ayrshire

Others said that, even if they had nothing to eat, they would avoid using a food bank, because of the feelings of shame and embarrassment associated with asking for help:



“I’d never lower myself to go and get one [a food parcel].”

Daniel, East Ayrshire



“Sometimes if I don’t have food in the house I still don’t ask to go to the food bank ... I don’t like asking”

Geoff, Fife



“I hate asking for help, ’cause other people need help too. That’s how I dinnae bother going to the food banks. Families could have them.”

Natalie, Dundee

Henry, in his early sixties and struggling to find work, felt uncomfortable seeking out any form of discretionary crisis support, as he believed that by receiving help other more ‘deserving’ groups might miss out:



“It’s a godsend having a food bank though, to be honest with you. But I don’t like using them for the same reason I don’t like taking money fae the Welfare Fund, there’s obviously families in more need of that than I am ... And I don’t like taking fae them.”

Henry, Fife

This feeling of being undeserving of food from food banks was repeated by others in the study. While most interviewees felt deeply uncomfortable about using food banks, the experiences of others did suggest that some models of food bank provision could deliver valuable social benefits:

“It’s quite good because people come here and if they’re no’ actually using the food bank, they use it for just the social interaction ... And to get out the house, and have a cup of tea and a chat. And that makes a’ the difference to some people, ken, like being stuck in the house, depressed and what no.”
Iain, Fife

“I come doon on a Thursday for the food bank. Well it’s called a food bank but it’s like, we sit roon’ a table an’ drink tea an’ talk.”
Sophie, East Ayrshire

Interviewees who had used a food bank had often been referred or signposted there by another service. Others knew about them from friends and family, or because they had used one previously. Referrals were made by a range of services, including the jobcentre, Citizens Advice Bureaux, the Scottish Welfare Fund, churches, community centres and other support services. Where a food bank referral was made by a specialist advice provider, it often came as part of a wider package of support to maximise income and address the causes of income crisis such as by

appealing benefit decisions. For example, Andrew was given a food bank referral by a court advisor who was supporting him with his rent arrears case. She also instigated a range of other support to help resolve his debt issues:

“She got my television licence sorted out for me ... I’ve just tae go and pay £6 a week for that. She got the rent sorted ... And she arranged to go and see Citizens Advice, a money advisor.”
Andrew, East Ayrshire

However, in some cases, a food bank referral appeared to have been made without any other intervention or advice. This was particularly true for services which interviewees had approached because they were known to hold food bank vouchers:

“I’ve come down here [community centre] to see if I can get a food parcel so I can pay the council debt ... Have they given you any other services you could go to? No, just the food bank.”
Frank, Dundee

Overwhelmingly, participants were aware of and concerned by food banks limiting the number of food parcels which could be accessed in a set period. Many who had received several parcels in the past were put off applying again or had experience of being refused another, either directly by the food bank or by the referring agency:

“

“When I put in for a food parcel the boy said that I wasn’t entitled to one, I’d already had three.”

Carol, Dundee

5.3 SOUP KITCHENS, COMMUNITY CAFES AND OTHER FOOD AID SUPPORT

Several interviewees described accessing other forms of food aid, including soup kitchens and community cafes serving free meals. This was often the case for people experiencing chronic food insecurity. Sean described how he visited a soup kitchen on an almost daily basis to help him get through the month on a very low income:

“

“I need to use the soup kitchens to like try and save some food that’s ... for later in the month.”

Sean, Dundee

It was apparent from the interviews in Dundee that there is a well-established and coordinated network of drop-in meal services, which is often relied upon by people facing food insecurity in the city. As Philip described:

“

“Luckily I went to a drop-in service and was given information and a leaflet on a food place in Dundee which I never knew about. And that’s how every day I now know at least I can eat. At least I know that I don’t have to worry about food.”

Philip, Dundee

Interviewees also described the benefits of accessing a range of support and advice services, which were often available on a drop-in basis at the community cafes they attended. Colin described the services available at the drop-in space he attended in East Ayrshire:

“

“They’re in the Evangelical Church on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday. It’s on like fae two to four. You go there, there’s sandwiches, stuff like that, there’s a representative fae housing, a representative fae Credit Union. A representative fae Citizens Advice, opticians and hairdressers, cooking classes, there’s all sorts of things.”

Colin, East Ayrshire

Community café type services accessed for food aid were often described as providing a welcoming space, where individuals could build trusting relationships with staff and volunteers who were then able to offer information, advice and advocacy support to help address the underlying drivers of food insecurity they were experiencing. Jenny, a lone parent in Dundee, described the support she received from a support worker she met at the community café she attended regularly. She described how the worker provided on-going support on a wide range of issues, including addressing a long-standing problem Jenny had with repairs needed to her council tenancy:

“She come into the café, and that was when I was about tae get evicted ... And she helped me out with loads of things. She did do a lot, like really to get things in place, and got sorted ... after four years it’s finally got sorted.”

Jenny, Dundee

Community café-type settings provided important opportunities for socialising, helping to counter the isolating effects of food insecurity which many had described. Natalie, who had been using drop-in services in Dundee for several years, described why she went:

“For food. Something to eat. Some company. Blether. Chat. Things like that. I mean, I’d be lost without here and a lot of these places. I mean, a lot of people would be very lost.”

Natalie, Dundee

Alison explained that she had been referred to a breakfast club by her children’s school, but highlighted the difficulty she faced in accessing it:

“The kids go to groups that have been suggested through the school. So, the kids are at least getting their breakfast at the weekends if I can get them there. But again, it’s getting them down there on time, quick enough, because again, if I have to do this all on public transport ... the hour bus journey.”

Alison, Dundee

Community cafes were not suitable for everyone. Two cases were described of individuals with additional needs not feeling comfortable going to such places. Anne, a lone parent whose daughter suffered from severe mental health problems, explained their experience:



“There’s that little local club round from us ... and you could pay a pound for a dinner. But when we went there, there was a couple o’ people kinda picked on her. But they’ve got mental health issues as well.”

Anne, East Ayrshire

5.4 THE SCOTTISH WELFARE FUND

Interviewees had mixed experiences of the Scottish Welfare Fund. Five of the 40 initial interviewees (12.5%) had not heard of the Fund, while 21 (52.5%) had received at least one award in the past. Most had received crisis grants to cover the costs of food and gas and electricity where they had no money to afford these essentials. Reasons for applying for crisis grants were commonly to do with benefits problems or changes including delays in receiving Universal Credit payments and disability benefits being stopped. Other reasons included struggling on a very low income because of insecure work, or having to pay back rent arrears and other debts. Participants commonly reported having found out

about the SWF from family or friends; others had been signposted to it by the jobcentre, or supported to apply by Citizens Advice Bureaux or other services, including housing. Some mentioned picking up leaflets about it at the library or jobcentre, or that they had come across it when searching the internet for available sources of support.

Some interviewees spoke very positively about the SWF and described the difference it had made to them at a time of particular hardship. Gordon was impressed by the speed at which he received an award:



“I phoned, I gave them my details, I explained a bit about how I had no money and what I needed the money for, and then they said they’d make a decision and it’d be a couple of hours and they would phone me back – and they did. And they were really quite helpful.”

Gordon, East Ayrshire

Most crisis grant awards were made in cash, accessed via PayPoint, while others received supermarket vouchers and top-ups for their energy meters. Alison, a lone parent with two disabled children, reflected on the importance of being able to choose the food she could buy, comparing receiving the crisis grant with a food parcel:

“I don’t mean this to sound cheeky about food banks, but that [the crisis grant] was more helpful ... for my son’s needs because he was able to go and pick what he wanted. Because he’s very choiceful in what he’s eating ... because he’s got learning difficulties he doesn’t quite understand”

Alison, Dundee

Alison also reflected on the value of the crisis grant in enabling her to meet other basic needs at a time of crisis:

“You’ve still got to wash your clothes, regardless. You’ve still got to do your dishes, regardless. You’ve still got to wash your hair and hygiene’s still got to be prominent regardless of whether there’s no money there or not.”

Alison, Dundee

How participants felt they were treated by SWF staff was hugely important and affected how likely they were to apply again. As with approaching a

food bank, the embarrassment associated with asking for help was also mentioned in relation to making applications to the Fund. Kim reflected on how she had felt before applying, and her surprise at the empathy she was shown:

“The ladies that I spoke to were all fantastic, and they were really kind on the phone and, not very judgy. I had palpitations at the idea of phoning and asking for help. But, they were so understanding.”

Kim, Fife

The intention of the SWF is that it provides holistic support and signposts applicants to other sources of help. For the participants in this study, however, it was uncommon for such advice to be offered:

“The Council [SWF decision-maker] never gave me any other avenues to go down or any other people to contact, they just said ‘sorry’ .”

Philip, Dundee

“I phoned up for a welfare payment, and they told me I wasn’t entitled to one, ‘cause I’ve had three since they started the welfare scheme, so they told me to see about a food bank voucher.”

Kerry, East Ayrshire

However, two interviewees described being asked about their wider needs and offered more money than they had applied for:

“The lady even says to me, ‘Are you sure ... are you sure that’s gonnae be enough?’ And, I was asked multiple times, ‘Are you sure that’s gonnae be enough for you? Are you wanting to apply for a little bit more?’”

Kim, Fife

Ruth, also in Fife, described how the SWF decision-maker had encouraged her to apply for a Personal Independence Payment,⁶³ and signposted her to a specialist service for people with eyesight problems.

It was apparent in some cases that a lack of understanding about the nature of the SWF and its eligibility criteria acted as a barrier to applying. Some interviewees referred to it as a “crisis loan”, despite the SWF having been established as a source of discretionary grants, following the abolition of the Social Fund in 2013. Kerry’s comments highlight a misconception which was shared by others in the study:

“At the end o’ the day we do pay it back, it’s not as if we don’t pay it back.”

Kerry, East Ayrshire

The most common reason given for not applying to the SWF, despite considerable financial difficulties, was that they had “had the maximum”. While interviewees were aware that there was a limit on the number of awards which could be received, understanding varied as to what that limit was. Most had been told, either by the SWF itself or by the service which had helped them apply, that they could only make three applications within 12 months. Some had also been told that they could not apply again for the same reason.⁶⁴ Kerry described how she was spoken to by the SWF decision-maker:

“When I got the money for my tax credits being delayed, I was really getting it quite pernicky from them [the SWF], they were saying to me, ‘Look, if this happens again, you’ll not be able to get another one’. And I thought it was supposed to be three in a year.”

Kerry, East Ayrshire

Having been previously refused an award also made it less likely that someone would apply again, while the negative experiences of friends or family also put people off applying.

Some interviewees described challenges in making a crisis grant application. The cost of the phone call was highlighted as a problem, as were the often very long waiting times to get through to someone. As Donald in Dundee commented: “it’s just a shocking length of time to wait. It was an hour and ten”. Kim

also reflected on the challenges of making an online application to the SWF for those who might have support needs:

“

“The application online is semi-easy, but that’s only for people that are fully literate. I don’t know what kind o’ support they’re offering for people that are dyslexic or maybe aren’t able to answer the questions as well as necessary because it is a bit of an infuriating website. It’s definitely needing some work done.”

Kim, Fife

In some cases, requests made for additional evidence of need were felt to be overly burdensome. Henry suggested feeling ashamed of being asked to prove he needed help:

“

“I had to take screen shots and everything, to prove ... I just felt like, I’m a person in need, do you think I’m gonnae be phoning up and asking you for money if I didnae need it? A man o’ my age, you know?”

Henry, Fife

For Philip, the Scottish Welfare Fund’s insistence on being provided with evidence considerably exacerbated and extended his crisis:

“

“She wouldn’t budge from her quest of ‘I need receipts for your rent.’ And I said, ‘Well the system that we have is that I don’t do it through my bank. It’s picked up every month.’ she just kept on asking, ‘We need receipts though, we need receipts.’ I said, ‘Well you don’t understand that, what I’ve just explained to you is that I will not have heating or electric. I’ll be in a dark flat, I’ll have no phone to charge or contact anyone with. And I’ll have no food.’ And this conversation went on for another fifteen minutes of me explaining how dire it’ll be and she wouldn’t budge from it. So I had to end the conversation ‘cause it was five to five and she was gonna finish her shift ... So after that experience I’ve just not phoned them back again ‘cause I have no proof of receipts and I have no money coming in now. So it’s literally just relying on the drop-in centres.”

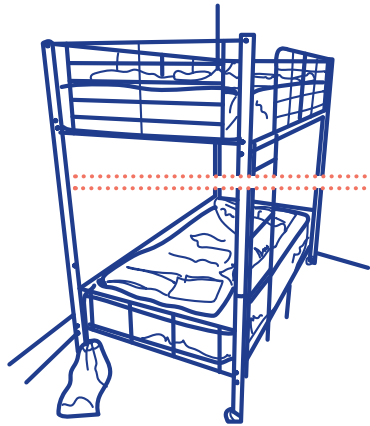
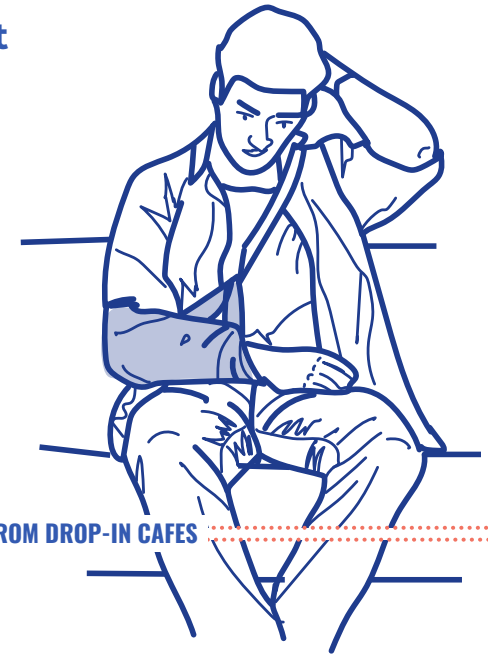
Philip, Dundee

Philip’s story is presented in the timeline on page 56.

PHILIP

AGE 24-35
LIVES ALONE

“ I went to a drop-in and was given a leaflet on food places, that’s how everyday I know at least I can eat. ”



5 MONTH STAY IN HOMELESS HOSTEL



3 X SWF
CRISIS GRANT

ON-GOING SUPPORT FROM DROP-IN CAFES

OPENS A UC
CLAIM: RECEIVES
ADVANCE

MADE REDUNDANT
FROM OIL AND GAS
SECTOR

LOOSES
PRIVATE LET

SECURES
ZERO-HOUR
CONTRACT JOB

BREAKS WRIST AND
LOSES JOB

UC CLAIM CLOSED IN ERROR
OPENS NEW CLAIM
SIGNPOSTED TO SWF
BY JOB CENTRE

FAILED
4TH SWF
APPLICATION

SECURES
TEMPORARY JOB

MAY 2017

NOVEMBER 2017

JANUARY 2018

MARCH 2018

“ Even though it was six years there was no pay-off. ”

“ It was through a recruitment agency, if you’re off more than ten days in six months you pretty much don’t have a leg to stand on. ”

“ They just went by the numbers saying “you’ve had three in the last six months, maxed out, there’s no other options”. ”

5.5 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

It was clear from analysis of the interview data that asking for help from any source when facing significant difficulties in affording food was not something which participants felt comfortable doing. Interviewees often turned to family first, but not all interviewees had such support networks. Food banks were widely used, both in cases of one-off crisis and for on-going difficulties in affording food. However, interviewees described strong feelings of shame associated with having to access them, feelings which did not diminish with repeat use.

Food-aid services which provided opportunities for socialising and for engaging with support and advice services appeared to have a very positive impact on participants in the study. For several participants, community café-type settings were an important source of social support, helping to counter the isolating effects of food insecurity, and often enabling them to engage with specialist help to address the financial and other problems they were facing. However, not everyone had easy access to or felt comfortable going to such services.

Interviewees' experiences of the Scottish Welfare Fund point to the value of being able to access cash in a crisis, but also to the importance of this support being readily available in order to be meaningful. An empathetic attitude from staff administering the

fund was clearly vital, while negative past experiences of the Fund put people off applying. Experiences also highlight the impact on applicants of excessive requirements to provide evidence of their financial difficulties before an award would be made. The examples in this study point to the need for a more proportionate approach to evidence gathering to be taken by decision-makers, a recommendation also made by research on the Scottish Welfare Fund published by A Menu for Change earlier this year.⁶⁵


In order to reduce the burden on crisis services, and not least to alleviate the negative impact of the experience of seeking help on those facing such difficulties, there is a clear need to focus urgent attention on addressing the upstream drivers of severe food insecurity. However, there are also clear implications of these findings for improving local crisis responses, including:

- ensuring that people have ready access to cash in a crisis, giving them choice and control to buy the things they need;
- ensuring that, when people access crisis services, systems are in place to connect them with advice and support services which can help address the causes of crisis; and
- investing in community services which are accessible, and provide opportunities for socialising and engaging with other support services.

6 FOOD INSECURITY TRIGGERS AND TRANSITION POINTS

A key aim of this research was to explore the journeys which might lead people to experience severe food insecurity. The research also sought to identify earlier intervention points where individuals might have been better supported to prevent them becoming food insecure.

This chapter examines key events and transitions, as identified in analysis of the interview data, which appear to cause people to fall into food insecurity. Reflecting on these findings, the chapter concludes by considering the ways in which preventative approaches might have helped improved people's outcomes, in order to inform future service design.

A person wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt, a dark cap, and safety glasses is standing on a wooden step ladder. They are reaching up with their right hand to adjust a light fixture on the ceiling. The room is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the fixture they are working on. In the background, there are stacks of boxes and other wooden structures, suggesting a warehouse or a storage area.

“You don’t know if he’s gonna’ go in today and come back without a job”

Harriet, Fife

6.1 MOVING IN AND OUT OF INSECURE WORK

For interviewees who had current or very recent experience of paid employment, the types of jobs described were highly insecure. These included agency work, zero-hours and very short-term contracts. Such insecurity left interviewees vulnerable to unexpected changes in their work patterns and weekly income, making it very difficult to budget or plan. In these contexts, spending on food was commonly the first thing which interviewees cut back on. Hilary, an interviewee in her early fifties and working a zero-hours contract cleaning job, was faced with not being able to afford essentials like food or paying her rent when her shifts were unexpectedly cut:

“So I had tae wait from a Friday to a Friday to find out have I got a shift. And this went on for seven weeks, which meant that I started to panic because I was thinking ‘Oh, can’t pay my rent.’ ... When I had the hours, you’re off housing benefit, you’re paying your own rent an’ everything was fine, but then when you’ve not got the hours an’ then you’ve not got any benefits coming in ... I’m in rent arrears now because of it.”

Hilary, East Ayrshire

Hilary’s story is presented in a timeline on page 49.

Henry described a similar lack of security in his zero-hours contract job in a factory, and the impact of changes in his shift patterns on his health:

“I was working for an agency and I was almost guaranteed work, I was doing constant night shift which was great ... But I had nothing off them since a week before Christmas. The reason for it was I was phoned and asked to do a day shift and they knew fine well I couldn’t ... because I’ve got arthritis in the hips and knees. And when you’re doing these shifts, you’re standing for four hours at a time at a conveyer belt and I’ve done it, but it was killing me when I was getting home and I was struggling to do the next shift ... at least on the night shift I was moving about all the time, so it alleviated any pains that I was getting but because I turned down a day shift just after Christmas, I think this is the reason they stopped giein’ me the night shift.”

Henry, Fife

Geoff, recently employed on a temporary basis with a fish-processing centre, described similar feelings of vulnerability:

“Hopefully I do get a contract. ‘Cause if I get a contract, I don’t have tae look over my shoulders ... ‘Cause if you’ve got a contract they’d have to gie you like a very good reason to let you go. Where wi’ the agency, they don’t have to gie you a good reason.”

Geoff, Fife

In the areas where the research was conducted, it was common for interviewees to move in and out of short contracts, some only a week long, with large employers, particularly Amazon. Like Henry and Geoff, many were contracted via recruitment agencies on a temporary basis. Interviewees often expressed their frustration at the lack of available full-time, permanent jobs. It was apparent that moving in and out of temporary work triggered cycles in and out of acute food insecurity because of gaps in income. Harriet, in her early twenties, described her husband's experience and the impact of the lack of secure employment on their ability to meet their basic needs:

“My partner’s always in and out of work, that’s always just temporary contracts, getting paid off, and it’s never like permanent, you don’t know if he’s gonna’ go in today and come back without a job, so that was always a bit of a worry, and sometimes if he’d get paid off and then he’d go to sign on, they wouldn’t sign him on for a month, so there was a bit of a gap between getting enough money and we really struggled. We would always be asking family for money or they’d help us out with shopping, but it just got to the point where we didn’t feel like we could ask anybody anymore, ’cause we’d done it so much. But it’s not just food, it’s running out of gas and electric and stuff, sitting in the dark for a few days and not eating just to make it to payday.”

Harriet, Fife

This account highlights the constant state of insecurity experienced by those navigating the temporary labour market. The end of a temporary contract or a loss of hours was often cited as the trigger for falling into acute food insecurity, while periods of more stable employment meant just about getting by.

Many described work experiences in which basic employee benefits, protections and rights were absent. Interviewees were often unclear about the nature of their employment status and what they were entitled to. Henry, an interviewee in his mid-fifties, described how he wished he had been given more: “knowledge on these zero hour contracts and what they are and aren’t. I mean I didnae know I was entitled to holiday pay”. He later described how his employer withheld holiday pay when he asked for it.

The same interviewee also described how he had been working for several months when he was unexpectedly sent his P45 by his employer. He was told it was a mistake, but Henry was concerned:

“So I let it go at that, just carried on wi’ the rest of the year working for them, but I thought, if you’ve gave me my P45 I’ve no’ signed a new contract. Surely that contract’s null and void?.”

Henry, Fife

HILARY

AGE 55-64
LIVES ALONE

“ When you’re not getting any hours and you’ve not got any benefits coming in... I’m in rent arrears now because of it. ”



“I didn’t want to just take any job. I don’t think I could emotionally cope with the stress of not knowing what you’ve got to live off every month.”



BUILD-UP OF RENT ARREARS

RELIANCE ON FOOD BANK

7 WEEKS OF NO SHIFTS AT ZERO-HOURS CONTRACT CLEANING JOB



LEAVES JOB



NEW UC CLAIM

DECEMBER 2016

“ I wasn’t allowed to sign on at the Job Centre because they said “Technically, you’re still employed, even although your name’s on a rota but you didn’t have any hours. ”



7 WEEK WAIT FOR UC PAYMENT



HOUSING OFFICER SUPPORT TO REDUCE REPAYMENTS

SECURES 16 HOUR JOB AT PETROL STATION

OCTOBER 2018

“ I was starting to get dizzy spells. I was having this problem with the reflux acid, which means I was going to the dentist, and he said, have you been sick a lot? it’s ruined the enamel of your teeth. ”



TAKES OUT UC LOAN TO BUY NEW GLASSES FOR JOB



RELIANT ON TAXIS TO GET HOME FROM LATE SHIFTS AND CAN’T AFFORD TO EAT

Philip, an interviewee in his late twenties, had been working offshore for an oil company for six years when he was laid off. He described how he was told he was not entitled to any redundancy pay: “because it was a Dutch company, and then their law – even though it was six years – you don’t get a pay-off”.

Without redundancy pay, or any advice or support from his employer during the redundancy process, Philip quickly fell into crisis, unable to afford his rent and becoming homeless when his landlord decided to sell the flat he was living in. He then lived for several months with no income, struggling to afford food and, as a result, lost a significant amount of weight. He described the impact of these sudden and dramatic changes:

“It was the first time in my life being without a job, I think it took me longer to figure everything out because I was in shock, because ever since I was sixteen I’ve always had a wage come in.”

Philip, Dundee

Later, Philip got a temporary job at a factory, but the lack of security meant he lost the job when he sustained an injury:

“I fractured my wrist and, because it was through a recruitment agency, it states clearly, if you’re off more than ten days in six months, then you pretty much don’t have a leg to stand on.”

Philip, Dundee

Philip’s story is presented in a timeline on page 56.

Several interviewees described challenges and lack of information about the status of agency workers. Examples were given which suggested employers may be taking advantage of agency workers:

“I think if they have a certain amount of time on their books they have to give them a full-time job. So, they stopped it, and they finished their contract on the Friday, and then started them on a new one with the seasonals on the Monday. So, that was a break in contract, so they didn’t have to get a full-time job.”

Duncan, Dundee

Geoff had initially been unaware that he was employed by an agency when he started his new job, and did not know if he would be offered a contract. He commented that several colleagues' employment status had remained temporary and insecure for an extended period of time:

“There are people that have been doon there for about three years. And they still havenae got a contract.”

Geoff, Fife

These examples highlight the critical role which precarious work played in shaping the experiences of food insecurity for individuals in this study. They underline the importance of basic employment benefits such as holiday pay, sickness pay and redundancy pay in terms of staff retention and wellbeing and as protection from food insecurity. A work environment in which such policies were absent made it difficult to stay in work, leaving workers particularly vulnerable to acute food insecurity because of a sudden loss of income.

6.2 MOVING OUT OF WORK FOR HEALTH REASONS

Several interviewees explained that they had previously had to stop work due to ill health, with two specifically identifying the transition as having triggered food insecurity. Some in this situation had no previous experience of being out of work or navigating the social security system. The emotional and financial challenges which this brought often appeared to compound their ill health. For example, Jenny, a lone parent, had two jobs when she was signed off work with chronic fatigue. She explained the financial impact of trying to live on sick pay, leaving her struggling to afford food:

“Off my half pay I was having to pay rent, 'cause I was getting threatened to be evicted. So obviously that comes first and then it wasn't leaving us enough to go and buy shopping.”

Jenny, Dundee

Andrew, who was forced to stop work for health reasons, fell into significant rent arrears while off sick. As a result, he struggled to afford to meet his basic needs and was left with no choice but to turn to a food bank. He described the challenge of trying to survive on sick pay, and the impact of being out of work on his mental health:

“If you’ve worked all your days, and you get an illness, you don’t want that illness, it comes to you, so that’s how I think we should get a wee bit mair money, or a wee bit mair help. All it’s doing is getting you skint, getting all your savings away, and you have to start over ... I’ve not got the heart to fight on.”

Andrew, East Ayrshire

Andrew had not had any interaction with advice services until he appeared in court threatened with eviction, several months after stopping work. He explained there had been a lack of clarity about how to communicate his change of circumstances to the council, which led to the build-up of rent arrears. He described the impact which realising he was in rent arrears had on his mental health, difficulties which appeared to create additional barriers to addressing the issue, until he was faced with the court order:

“You had to notify them [the council housing department] that you’re no’ working, that you’re on the sick, And I actually thought the sick line did that ... You fill in a form and you hand it in and you think that’s the end o’ it, but then you get a letter through maybe a month-and-a-half later ... and then you go ‘Jesus, that’s gonnae be hard to catch up. How can I pay that?’ and then worry, worry, worry, and then the next thing, heid doon. Slumping about.”

Andrew, East Ayrshire

6.3 MOVING ON TO UNIVERSAL CREDIT

In other cases, a sudden drop in income came about because of a change in the benefits participants were receiving. For many, this change involved moving on to Universal Credit from Employment Support Allowance or Jobseeker's Allowance. Under current policy, a change of circumstances may result in someone who is already receiving benefits having to make a new claim for Universal Credit, for example someone who moves in with or separates from a partner, or becomes a parent, or becomes unfit to work. Once on Universal Credit, it is generally not possible to move back onto legacy benefits.⁶⁶ Alison had this experience of being moved on to Universal Credit, when she was found fit for work while claiming ESA. She explained that she was receiving advocacy support to challenge this decision:

“He’s [solicitor] appealing that I shouldn’t have been taken from the benefits that I was on ontae Universal Credit. Because as he said, ‘You’re losing out on about a hundred pounds a week’ ”.

Alison, Dundee

Acute food insecurity and reliance on food banks was often directly related to the impacts of moving on to Universal Credit for participants in this study. Natalie explained that, since being moved on to Universal Credit, she found herself increasingly reliant on the drop-in community centres and soup kitchens for food:

“Since I’ve been put on Universal Credit I come more regular ... like taking food away with us. I never used to do that because I was able to manage with money.”

Natalie, Dundee

For many participants, the wait time before initial payment after opening a new claim created a gap in income which caused many to go hungry and, as discussed at 6.3 below, forced them into rent arrears and other debts. Waiting to pass initial identification checks required by the DWP also added to delays in receiving payments:

“I couldnae get an advance payment because I had to prove who I was first.”

Henry, Fife

While many interviewees were offered advance payments by the Job Centre to cover the wait time, some described feeling reluctant to take out large advances on their Universal Credit, which would have left them with reduced income for an extended period as they repaid the advance:

“They said I can take out an advanced payment. I’ve chosen not to take out the full amount ... the maximum I could take was thirteen hundred pounds, that would have been a hundred pound off my Universal Credit every month.”

Alison, Dundee

Where interviewees did take out an advance, these payments were often not sufficient to meet basic needs:

“I’ve had to use the food bank once again since I last spoke to you ... because even though I got an advance fae my Universal Credit, I had to pay the majority of that towards my rent to catch up on that. So, it still left me kinda short.”

Henry, Fife

Interviewees on Universal Credit often described significant deductions being made to their monthly income in order to repay advances, rent arrears and other debts, which had often accumulated during periods when they were receiving no income. Derek explained the impact of Universal Credit deductions on his income:

“I had accrued these debts which they are clawing back now, so I am on like 50 quid a week ... and in the winter with my heating bills and everything.”

Derek, Dundee

Some interviewees described being unaware of why deductions were being made from their benefits. Jenny, having moved out of work due to ill-health, found herself having to pay back overpaid tax credits and other costs she was unclear the reason for:

“Something about an overpayment from ten years ago from Jobseekers Allowance.”

Jenny, Dundee

Interviewees often found themselves paying off historical debts for extended periods, making it very difficult to afford basics such as food:

“I was paying that much money out and didn’t have enough money for tae pay out and buy food, so I’ve come down here [to the food bank] to see if I can get a food parcel so I can pay the council debt ... Council Tax arrears from years ago ... it’s going back say about fifteen, eighteen years.”

Pat, Dundee

“I got a budgeting loan a couple o’ year ago, so I’m still paying that off.”

Carol, Dundee

6.4 REASSESSMENT FOR DISABILITY BENEFITS

Other benefit changes which resulted in a loss of income came about following disability benefit assessments, where the applicant was found to be no longer eligible for the benefit. This experience often left interviewees waiting several months or even years for their appeal against the decision to be processed. In the meantime, interviewees were left facing considerable financial difficulties. For three interviewees, who were lone parents of disabled children, these changes occurred following a review of their disability benefits. Anne explained what happened to her and her 18-year-old daughter Chloe:

“Then we had a review of her PIP, and then they just took everything off me ... they gave her no points whatsoever. So I lost that, and I lost the Carer’s Allowance. Chloe was on the highest amount of PIP, so you’re talking about, it was £500 odd. And £60 odd, Carer’s Allowance. So I lost quite a good bit o’ money.”

Anne, East Ayrshire

Alison, also a lone parent, described a very similar experience. A decision to downgrade her son's Disability Living Allowance meant that she also lost her Carer's Allowance and other benefits associated with being a carer, which had a considerable impact on family life:

“It's the length of time this has been going on for ... until Simon's Disability Living Allowance is sorted out, there's no bus pass. That, again, has been removed. I'm relying then on my stepdad to do the transporting. If it wasn't for him picking up some of the food bank parcels as well ... simple little decisions for them [the government] are a massive game changer for me.”

Alison, Dundee

By the time of her second interview, these benefits had been reinstated, but the impacts of the loss of income over a two-year period on her son's and her own physical and psychological wellbeing were significant:

“You can't hide the fact that there's no food in the cupboards ... Simon was scared to put the heating on, he was scared to put the lights on, he was sitting in the dark. We shouldn't be having a 13-year-old turning round and saying 'I'm going to kill myself if this isn't sorted out.' Not nice as a mum to hear ... He went to his cupboard and tried to kill himself.”

Alison, Dundee

Alison described worrying about the annual review of her son's DLA, and the impact which this anticipation of a change in their income had on her son:

“I think he's feeling a bit stressed 'cause I've noticed a behavioural change because he's aware that his birthday's coming up and that's every time when the refresh is up. So it doesn't help Simon enjoy having a thirteenth birthday party.”

Alison, Dundee

Alison's story is presented in a timeline on page 43.

In both Anne and Alison's cases the disability decisions were eventually overturned on appeal, while Jenny was still waiting for her appeal to be processed, but she reported that her solicitor was confident it would be successful. These examples highlight the unnecessary damage caused by incorrect initial assessments.

DUNCAN

AGE 45-54 LIVES ALONE WITH 18 YEAR OLD SON

“Anxiety, never knowing when your next payment or next meal’s coming fae.”

“I just wish I could get a full-time job, you know, where it was permanent rather than temp. It’s all just temporary jobs at the moment so it’s not my fault that this happened. It’s contract ending. I’ve no’ been sacked, I’ve no’ walked oot the job or anything... but I’m being punished.”



REPEAT FOOD BANK USE
BUILD UP OF RENT AREAS



6 MONTH JOB



£0.10 UC PAYMENT

2 WEEK JOB

3 MONTH JOB



UC PAYMENT



9 WEEK WAIT



DELAYED UC PAYMENT

SECURES NEW JOB

FEBRUARY 2016

NOVEMBER 2017

“I’ve been on Universal Credit for two years an’ I’ve had three breaks in work an’ I’ve had nothing. Oh, they sent me a cheque for one pence an’ that’s to do me a month.”

“They phoned my MP and then my MP done nothing, just said “Well, that’s the Tories for you. Just wanted my vote.”

“They only gave me so much because they can’t cover you for two months.”

“I should be able to just walk into the Job Centre, and there should be somebody there to ask.”

“I’ve still to look for work before I start a job.”



6.5 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Evidence presented in this chapter underlines and adds to existing evidence of the critical role of insecure, unstable and unpredictable incomes in driving food insecurity.⁶⁷ Sudden drops in income or complete loss of income through changes in work hours, moving out of work, or changing benefits were identified as key triggers for quickly becoming severely food insecure and being unable to meet basic costs such as rent or heating.

These changes in circumstances often led to the accumulation of rent arrears and debts, which extended the experience of food insecurity and made it very difficult to recover from. These findings point to the inadequacies of incomes from benefits and wages at the bottom end of the labour market, making it difficult to build up any savings which might help provide a buffer against sudden drops in income and enable people to manage their priority payments (including rent, energy and food) when experiencing a change in circumstances.

The findings echo existing evidence of the role of Universal Credit in exposing people to destitution, particularly as a result of the waiting time for initial payment and the high rate at which deductions are made. Disability benefit reassessments also triggered food insecurity, through a loss of income. This is particularly concerning, given that

elsewhere in this study food insecurity has been found to exacerbate existing health problems. Research has shown that people with disabilities have been particularly adversely affected by welfare reform policies.⁶⁸ The findings also underline the need for better communication of benefit decisions and access to advice about benefit changes and entitlements as well as support to appeal decisions.

Importantly, these findings draw attention to the precarious nature of the labour market, specifically for agency workers and those on zero-hours or temporary contracts, as a key driver of food insecurity. Moving in and out of temporary work often meant moving in and out of severe food insecurity. Not knowing how much money they would receive each month made it impossible to plan ahead and was a cause of anxiety for many interviewees in this study. The end of a temporary contract often meant having to make hard choices between covering basic costs, such as eating, paying rent or heating their homes.

These findings echo concerns raised by the TUC regarding the widespread non-compliance with minimum standards among recruitment agencies, and the difficulty of enforcing employment rights in the sector, meaning many agency workers miss out on basic rights such as holiday pay.⁶⁹

There are clear policy implications of these findings for protecting people from such frequent and dramatic changes in income at points of transition in their lives. These include:

- ensuring incomes from both work and benefits are adequate, stable and reliable;
- increasing the availability of secure contracts with guaranteed hours and employment standards;
- providing better support for people who develop ill health to remain in the labour market, and protecting them from income crisis when they are unable to do so; and
- ensuring that the social security system serves as a responsive and reliable safety net, recognising current insecurities in the labour market, so that, when people transition onto or between benefits, adequate protection is in place to prevent the change in circumstances from causing people to fall into crisis.

7 THE WIDER CONTEXTS OF FOOD INSECURITY EXPERIENCES

Chapter Six described the types of short-term challenges and sudden changes in circumstances which often caused interviewees in this study to fall into severe food insecurity.

By taking a longitudinal approach, this study was able to step back from these immediate experiences to consider a more holistic and long-term view of the individuals who took part in the study and identify wider influences on their food insecurity experiences. This chapter considers the implications of historical adverse life events, as well as chronic difficulties, for leaving people particularly vulnerable to, and particularly adversely affected by, severe food insecurity when the sorts of triggers and transitions described in Chapter Six occur.

“When my dad passed away, everything just kinda fell apart.”

Blair, East Ayrshire

From this perspective, it is possible to identify potential preventative intervention strategies which could be adopted by a wide range of services to protect groups who might be particularly at risk of food insecurity.

7.1 ADVERSE LIFE EXPERIENCES

For several interviewees experiencing food insecurity, the significant financial challenges they faced were often set within a context of considerable emotional and psychological difficulties, as a result of traumatic life events. Many interviewees described historical experiences of trauma and lives affected by multiple psychological, emotional and social difficulties. Participants facing severe food insecurity included particularly vulnerable individuals: a war veteran; a care-experienced person; people engaged in substance misuse; and survivors of child abuse and domestic violence. Several interviewees also had experience of the criminal justice system and of homelessness. It was apparent that these experiences had lasting effects across the life course, impacting on and impacted by the food insecurity interviewees were facing.

7.1.1 BEREAVEMENT

The impacts of sudden bereavements, often having occurred many years previously, were still felt very acutely by many interviewees. One interviewee Carol, in recovery from heroin addiction, described relapsing around the anniversary of her brother's sudden death. Blair, a war veteran who had sustained brain damage and suffered from post-traumatic stress from his time in Afghanistan, described how caring for his disabled father on his return had kept him occupied. However, the death of his father appeared to trigger a breakdown, and Blair was left not knowing where to turn to for help:

“I was my dad’s carer, and obviously if you’re a carer you’re there 24/7, so your mind’s occupied constantly. But when my dad passed away, everything just kinda fell apart. Ken, my knowledge wi’ like using numbers and ‘right, I’ve got this bill tae pay, I’ve got that bill tae pay’, well, aye, it just, it just collapsed. That’s when everything just kinda crashed in on me. I didn’t know what tae dae, where tae go, what kind o’ help, what kind o’ advice. So I didnae know any o’ that.”

Blair, East Ayrshire

The sudden impact of this bereavement and the long-term effects of his experiences in combat left Blair in a very isolated and vulnerable position. He explained how he struggled to cope, relying on his sister, who had her own health problems, to manage his finances and basic tasks such as doing his food shopping. He described how he lost his father's house where he had been living, and that later he had a short stay in prison before moving in to a homeless hostel and having to turn to the food bank for food. The details of Blair's story are presented in a timeline on page 69. His experiences highlight the compounding impact of traumatic life events, which for Blair resulted in homelessness and severe food insecurity.

7.1.2 CHILD ABUSE

Two interviewees spoke about incidents of child abuse and the long-term impacts which these had on both the survivors and their families. Daniel, in his early twenties, was severely food insecure, having recently been made redundant. At second interview, he described having experienced sexual abuse as a child and explained the difficulties he had in trusting services. The impact of this historical trauma on his mental health and ability to cope was clearly profound:



“I suffer from depression. I’m alright during the day. It’s night time I suffer. So I start, like, maybe taking tablets, slashing my arms.”

Daniel, East Ayrshire

In Rose's case, the long-term damage caused by her son's experience of abuse as a child appeared to be part of the reason why she was facing food insecurity. At her first interview, Rose explained that her son was in prison and she was providing him with financial support, while struggling to get by on Universal Credit herself. At her third interview, Rose revealed that her son had an alcohol addiction and had only recently told her that he had been the victim of an incident of child abuse. He was now engaging with counselling and support for his addiction. It was apparent that this revelation was distressing for Rose. She indicated that she had suffered the effects of her son's traumatic experience all of his adult life. She expressed anger at the lack of earlier interventions to help address the cause of his problems:



“Why do you have to go to prison to get help? I’ve been asking for help for years, especially wif the drinking, and he only gets it when he goes to prison.”

Ruth, Fife

In these cases, depression, self-harm, addictions and imprisonment were identified as the severe long-term consequences of child abuse.



7.1.3 HOMELESSNESS

Two interviewees described the experience of becoming homeless and its implications for their physical and mental wellbeing, as well as their ability to sustain work.

Philip, an interviewee in his late twenties, quickly became homeless after losing his job. He described struggling to cope, living in homeless accommodation and trying to hold down a temporary job. He explained how this distressing experience of living in a hostel severely affected his health:

“In a homeless unit, you’re surrounded by a lot o’ people that are drug users and alarms were going off constantly. I was trying to keep this job at the Michelin [tyre factory]. That was 12-hour shifts. I couldn’t get sleep because the fire engines ... there must have been ten to 15 alarms a week. So I ended up having to get put on sleeping tablets, and anti-depressants because there was one time where I collapsed going to work because of lack o’ sleep.”

Philip, Dundee

Eating well in this context was significantly challenging, and Philip described how he relied on drop-in cafes in the city in order to eat:



“That [the drop-ins] completely saved me, because I realised then, I don’t need to stress about, every day I’m going to be able to eat.”

Philip, Dundee

At her first interview, Harriet explained that she had to leave her home when she separated from her husband and became homeless. She described the experience of living in homeless accommodation while working 12 hours a week at a B&Q in the next town. She had recently given up her college course, expecting to be offered more hours at work, but these hadn’t been forthcoming. Despite having a job, Harriet had been severely food insecure, often relying on food aid:



“I just didn’t have enough money, and then the homeless, they’d get Greggs coming round on a Tuesday, that was literally the best day, ‘cause I knew I was gonna be able to eat that day kinda thing, and I did go round to the food bank, which was close by, and I got like, like soups and tins and stuff, and like some pasta and that ... But I think there’s, like a total stigma as well and because I had a job everybody thought I was just, I was gonna be fine.”

Harriet, Fife

This section has highlighted some of the adverse and often highly traumatic life experiences described by interviewees in this study. The long-term psychological and emotional impacts of these experiences, combined with failings in the housing, social security and employment systems, appeared to leave interviewees vulnerable to food insecurity. Such experiences clearly exacerbated, and were exacerbated by, experiences of food insecurity for interviewees in this study.

7.2 CARING FOR OTHERS

Many of the research participants had considerable caring responsibilities. Eight of the interviewees were lone parents (seven women and one man). Trying to manage such responsibilities when incomes were inadequate to meet basic needs brought significant financial, emotional and social pressures. These challenges were particularly acute for the lone parents involved in this study. In their role as care-giver, lone parents described needing to prioritise their children’s needs over their own, often going without food themselves:



“Obviously my main priority’s making sure my kids are fed. And if it’s the difference between me getting fed or them getting fed, then it’s them obviously.”

Kerry, East Ayrshire

Alison, a lone parent with two disabled children, also described wanting to protect her children from the impacts of her food insecurity. In addition, she explained feeling social pressure to keep the extent of their difficulties a secret from her children:

“People have said to me historically, ‘Don’t tell them what’s going on.’ Well when you’re having to get a food bank parcel delivered to your door, you know, and the children are here, you can’t really hide that. You can’t hide that there’s no food in the cupboard.”

Alison, Dundee

Kim, a lone parent who had been in care herself as a teenager, looked after her two sons who both had disabilities. She described the difficulties she faced making ends meet:

“Money is always quite tight when you’re a single parent wi’ two. Household bills are pretty hard to cover, especially with their dad’s out of work at the moment as well.”

Kim, Fife

Beyond caring for their own children, some interviewees described taking on additional caring responsibilities for other relatives. For example, Jenny, a lone parent with three children, also had kinship care responsibility for her niece.

Four of the lone parents interviewed had children with complex health problems, including autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, severe epilepsy and learning difficulties. Each of these women described prioritising their children’s needs above everything, and explained the additional challenge of meeting these needs when facing financial difficulties. For example, Anne, who had recently moved from the south of England in the hope of providing better opportunities for her disabled daughter, explained the sacrifices she had made:

“I used all the money to get here, to better her ... ’cause couldn’t get her into a college in England because of all her difficulties.”

Anne, East Ayrshire

“I still tried to make sure that I had, I would say, probably a balanced meal for my daughter. Maybe not so much for myself.”

Anne, East Ayrshire

Their children’s health conditions or impairments had a huge impact on every aspect of daily life. For example, Kim described her son’s extreme motion sickness:



“We can’t get him to the hospital appointments by bus, because he’ll get maybe ten, 15 minutes down the line, he’ll start choking, he’ll start vomiting.”

Kim, Fife

Parents also described the difficulty of applying for disability benefits or accessing specialist services for their children. As Kim explained:



“We’d tried to fill DLA forms in for Ryan last year, and it was horrendous, the questions are so demeaning ... when it’s your own child, you feel like you’re betraying them.”

Kim, Fife

Some interviewees described providing financial support for their adult children. For example, at the time of his first interview, Duncan’s adult son was living with him and was out of work, not contributing towards the household costs. With his son at home all day, Duncan’s heating bills were higher than they might otherwise have been. By the second interview, however, Duncan’s son had got a job and therefore the financial pressures on the household had eased somewhat.

Similarly, Rose, living alone, described sending money to her adult son while he was in prison and helping to support him financially upon release. This added to her existing financial burdens, as she was struggling to get by on Universal Credit and paying

off rent arrears. She had also worked hard to ensure her son was able to retain his tenancy while in prison and to help him claim Universal Credit after he was released.

In addition to the caring responsibilities they had for their own children, several interviewees described giving occasional, informal financial support to friends and family beyond their immediate household. For example, Alison, a lone parent, explained why she had taken out a Credit Union loan at Christmas:



“One of them was actually tae help a friend out, because he’d been struggling financially, he’s a single dad with two children, doesn’t get any benefits, he’s working his socks off, and he’s pretty much, he’s on the breadline too.”

Alison, Dundee

The experience of food insecurity made it difficult for interviewees in this study to fulfil their caring responsibilities, while the lack of adequate support for caring arguably exacerbated the difficulties which interviewees faced in affording to meet their basic needs.

7.3 LONG-TERM HEALTH CONDITIONS

It was very common for interviewees to describe managing long-standing health conditions. Challenges associated with their own conditions or those of family members they cared for were very often part of the wider context for the people facing food insecurity who took part in this study. At their first interview, most participants described how their health had deteriorated over the previous 12 months.

Overwhelmingly, the long-term conditions which interviewees described related to their mental health. 29 of the 40 participants in the first round of interviews spoke of some sort of long-standing mental health condition. Depression and anxiety were very common, while others described more severe conditions, including schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder. Matthew, who struggled with addictions, described living with an undiagnosed mental health condition:

“I was schizophrenic all my life so I got picked up at 26 ... I’d had it since I was about 12.”

Matthew, Dundee

Five interviewees were either active drug users or in recovery from drug addiction. Some identified their drug addiction as a key cause of their inability to afford food, while others described the challenge of staying drug-free when having to cope with the stress of financial problems. For example, Natalie, who had been in recovery from heroin addiction for two years when she was moved on to Universal Credit, said:

“That [the benefit change] doesnae help you in any recovery. I mean, I’m surprised at myself that I’ve not hit the drugs.”

Natalie, Dundee

Other health conditions which interviewees reported included fibromyalgia, arthritis, diabetes and back problems. These health conditions were often the reason why interviewees had needed to stop work.

Alison, a lone parent who struggled with chronic pain and thyroid problems, reflected on the close connection between her financial, psychological and physical wellbeing:

“When that income is removed, the stress factor is through the roof, which then doesn’t help the pain management.”

Alison, Dundee

7.4 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These findings indicate that, for interviewees in this study, food insecurity was often closely connected to deeply personal, highly traumatic life events and was experienced within a context of significant health difficulties as well as considerable caring responsibilities. These findings underline the importance of taking a holistic approach to understanding and responding to food insecurity, recognising that decisions take in isolation, for example in relation to benefit entitlement, often interact with an individual's wider life circumstances. They also point to the need for early intervention by a wide range of services to help prevent food insecurity among groups considered to be particularly at risk.

The experiences of individuals engaged in this research highlight critical events and transitions, including bereavement, childhood abuse, homelessness, leaving the armed forces and leaving care, which can leave people vulnerable to food insecurity. To help prevent the long-term negative effects of adverse life experiences, including vulnerability to food insecurity, there is a need for services (including health, social care, housing and advice) to be sensitive and responsive to the ways in which such experiences can impact on people throughout their lives. Early interventions which provide a holistic needs assessment, including the

provision of income maximisation and advice, could help improve outcomes for vulnerable individuals.

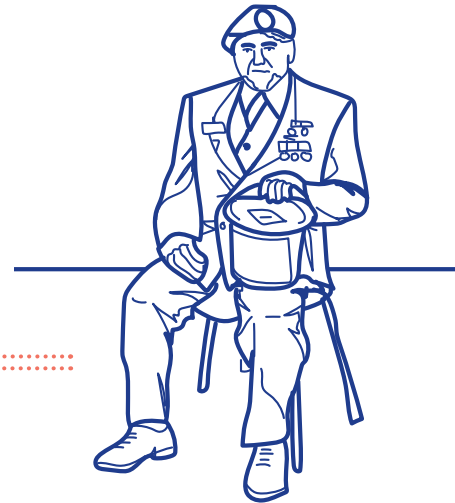
The prevalence of chronic health problems, notably mental health conditions, among the food insecure individuals involved in this research highlights the need for the relationship between ill health and food insecurity to be considered in the designing of health services. The examples in this study of mental health crises and chronic difficulties also highlight the urgent need for preventative spending in mental health services. While Chapter Four presented evidence of the impact of food insecurity on health, the findings in this chapter suggest that managing long-term health conditions may also make people more vulnerable to food insecurity. The integration of welfare rights advice and wider social support services within primary care settings is an example of preventative and holistic service design which could be further investigated.

The findings in this chapter echo wider evidence of the vulnerability of particular groups – notably lone parents and people with disabilities – to food insecurity. Chapter Two highlighted the ways in which welfare reforms have impacted particularly on those with caring responsibilities and disabilities, undermining the role social security should play in providing protection to people at vulnerable points in their lives. These findings add weight to arguments for proactive investment in services and social security protections for these groups.

BLAIR

AGE 55-64
LIVES ALONE

“ When I lost my dad, and I just went in tae depression, and everything just kinda fell in. ”



CARING FOR FATHER

SHORT STAY IN PRISON

VOLUNTEERING WITH VETERAN'S CHARITY



BRAIN INJURY FROM
TIME IN MILITARY,
PTSD

DECEMBER 2016

“ I was my dad's carer. Constantly, twenty-four seven. And then when I lost my dad, and I just went in tae depression, and everything just kinda fell in. ”



FATHER DIES



LOSES FATHER'S
HOME



MOVED INTO HOMELESS
SHELTER



NEW UC
CLAIM

DECEMBER 2017

“ I don't know when the next time I'd be eligible to get another, ken, food bank thing. So it'd be a case 'o, starving, until the next sheet o' paper, to get tae the food bank. ”



FOODBANK
VISIT



SCOTTISH
WELFARE
FUND AWARD



REFERAL TO VETERAN'S
GROUP BY HIS GP


DECEMBER 2018

“ I've been through it then therefore maybe I can help other people.. that's what actually got me more an' more involved.. It's a big part of my life now. ”

8

CHANGE OVER TIME FOR PEOPLE

This chapter considers the nature of the changes experienced by the interviewees over the course of the research period. It also examines the role played by services in helping to bring about positive change, as well as identifying where a lack of appropriate intervention may have contributed to things getting worse.



“Everything is worse because I’ve got less money”

Jenny, Dundee

Following up with research participants and interviewing them on three occasions allowed for reflection on changes which had occurred since the previous interview, and the identification of short- and longer-term outcomes following an experience of food crisis.

Twenty-two participants were interviewed four to six weeks after the first interview, over this period:

- 8 said things had got better
- 8 said things had got worse
- 6 said things had stayed the same

Ten participants were interviewed for a third time, 11 months since their second interview, reflecting on change since then:

- 8 said things had got better
- 1 said things had got worse
- 1 said things had stayed the same

8.1 EVIDENCE OF POSITIVE CHANGE AFTER FOOD CRISIS

In general, the positive changes which interviewees reported were attributed to improvements in financial circumstances. Such improvements included the resolution of problems with benefits, for example having disability benefits reinstated or receiving back payments after winning an appeal on a benefits decision. In other cases, interviewees or their family members had moved into employment since the first interview, and as a result their household income had increased.

At her first interview, Kim, a lone parent with two children, was in financial crisis, because of an incident of fraudulent activity on her bank account, which had left her with no money while she waited for the issue to be resolved. This unexpected event had occurred within the wider context of struggling to get by on a low income. Kim described the long and complicated process of applying for disability benefits for her two sons. She also mentioned that she was giving financial help to her ex-husband who had recently lost his job and started claiming Universal Credit. By the second interview, Kim's financial circumstances had improved. The problem with her bank account had been resolved. Disability benefits had been instated for her son, and he had received back-dated payments for the months they had been waiting for a decision. Kim also mentioned that she had finished paying off a budgeting loan,

which increased her monthly income. In addition, her ex-husband had got a job, which meant that Kim was no longer helping him out financially and he was able to make child maintenance contributions. This also eased the pressure on Kim's household finances. She described the impact of these financial changes:

“Everything I've ever had to borrow for like a budgeting loan or whatever is paid, benefits are all up and running, DLA money is sorted for the kids ... it's a good feeling 'cause obviously I'm not having to pay extra every week. Which means I've been able to buy the kids' stuff that I maybe wouldn't have without struggling as much ... even with the challenges of school uniform and stuff, I'm not having to worry.”

Kim, Fife

Kim's story is presented in a timeline on page 85.

Analysis of interview data indicated that positive change since the first interview was often related to feeling more in control of finances. Interviewees often reported having paid off debts or having received support to better manage debts or reduce repayments. This was particularly the case with rent arrears, which had often built up following benefit changes, leaving participants feeling very anxious. Henry had accrued rent arrears when he stopped being given shifts at his zero-hours contract job. At first interview, Henry was relying on the food

bank, as well as a Scottish Welfare Fund grant, and had prioritised putting his Universal Credit advance towards paying off his rent arrears. He was very anxious about being evicted. By the second interview, Henry had managed to pay off all of his rent arrears and had arranged for the housing component of his Universal Credit to be paid directly to his landlord:

“I'll sleep better as well, because I've got my rent sorted out a bit better.”

Henry, Fife

It was clear that improvements in financial circumstances between interviews were often closely connected to reports of improved health. Alison, a lone parent with two disabled children, reflected on how having problems with her benefits resolved had improved her mental health, which had a knock-on effect on her physical health:

“I think I'm on the road to recovery, physically I'm a bit better, but I'm physically better because my mental health's a bit better ... it's all tied together.”

Alison, Dundee

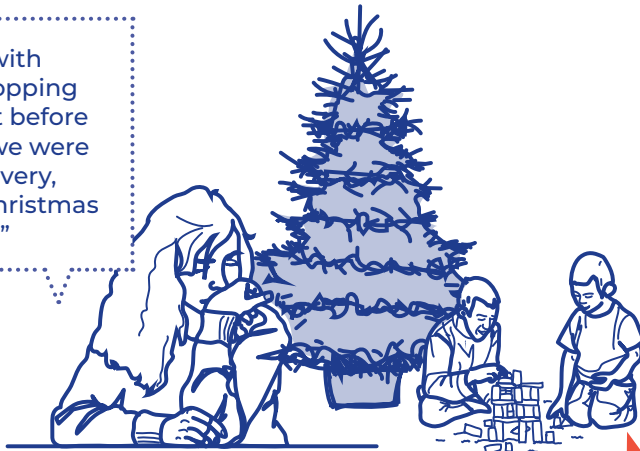
KIM

AGE 25-34 LONE PARENT WITH TWO SONS, BOTH HAVE DISABILITIES

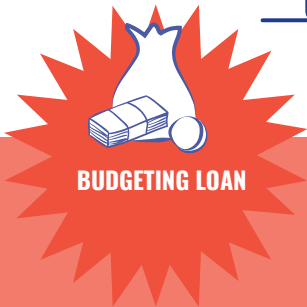
“ Money is always quite tight when you’re a single parent.”

“Obviously with their dad stopping working just before Christmas, we were looking at a very, very tight Christmas for the boys.”

“She does absolutely everything, like applying for the kids school uniforms grant, even if you’re stressed or struggling wi’ anything at all, Laura is genuinely like one of the unsung heroes, all the mums kinda go tae her.”



INFORMAL SUPPORT FROM NURSERY WORKER



BUDGETING LOAN



£90 FRAUD ON BANK ACCOUNT



SCOTTISH WELFARE FUND AWARD



THIRD SECTOR SUPPORT TO APPLY FOR SON'S DLA



INCOME INCREASED

DEBTS REPAID AND DLA IN PLACE

DECEMBER 2016

APRIL 2017

JULY 2017

“ We had food shopping due to come out my bank the next morning, and it was obviously kinda panic mode. ”

“ The ladies that I spoke to were all fantastic, and they were really kind on the phone and, not very judgy. I had palpitations at the idea of phoning of and asking for help. But, they were so understanding. ”

“ It was so much less stressful, we’d tried to fill DLA last year, and it was horrendous, the questions are so demeaning. ”

“ Everything I’ve ever had to borrow for like a budgeting loan or whatever is paid, benefits are all up and running, DLA money is sorted for the kids, Which means I’ve been able tae buy the kids’ stuff that I maybe wouldn’t have without struggling as much... I’m not having to worry. ”

Similarly, Kim described how she was better able to cope with her existing health conditions, because she had fewer financial worries:

“It’s a lot easier to deal with, because I’m not spending so much time stressing out.”

Kim, Fife

Interviewees who had moved into work over the research period generally reported that this had a positive impact on their lives. At the third interview, a year on from the initial meeting, Geoff was in full-time work after over a year out of work, and the change in his demeanour and outlook from previous interviews was significant. Geoff was far more optimistic: “I’m happy ... I just want to see the future”. For Geoff, having a job meant he was able to do things with his daughter and visit family.

8.2 THE ROLE OF SERVICES IN BRINGING ABOUT POSITIVE CHANGE

Many interviewees who reported positive changes in their circumstances over the research period described the role of support and advice services in helping bring about that change. Where financial circumstances had improved, this was often the result of support received from advice services to resolve problems with benefits or repayments, including appealing decisions. It was hugely reassuring for interviewees to feel that someone understood the difficulties they were facing and was prepared to challenge decisions on their behalf.

Some interviewees had engaged with mainstream advice services, such as the local Citizens Advice Bureau or law centre, via referrals or signposting from places such as the jobcentre. Housing services were also often cited as a key source of support and advice regarding benefits issues:

“In fact it’s mostly been the housing that helps me deal wi’ my benefits and things like that. They’re more help than the jobcentre.”

Kerry, East Ayrshire

However, interviewees often received help to resolve financial and other problems through informal networks or services not specialised in advice provision. Staff, volunteers, and other service users at schools, nurseries and community centres were often the people identified as the source of essential information and support, which helped with a wide range of challenges. It was apparent that the women interviewed were more likely to be engaged with such support networks than the men. This was often because support was received via services they were accessing for their children.

For example, Kim, a lone parent with two disabled children, described how she got support to complete a DLA application for her son via a contact she made on a Facebook group for parents of children with autism. She also described the vital emotional and practical support provided by a worker at her children's nursery:

“She comes in to run groups for mums ... She does absolutely everything, like even applying for the kids school uniforms grant, I had to go to her 'cause I was like, ‘I’ve never applied for this, Laura, I’m so confused.’ And she sat and filled it in with us, but even if you’re stressed or struggling wi’ anything at all, Laura is genuinely like one of the unsung heroes, all the mums kinda go tae her.”

Kim, Fife

Kim also described how information she received via the nursery helped her to feel informed and prepared for the introduction of Universal Credit:

“At the nursery, Laura ran a group with Citizen’s Advice when it first kinda came around about the change o’ benefits. So, we got quite a lot of advice about the advance payments and stuff.”

Kim, Fife

Alison, also a lone parent with disabled children, described the positive impact of meeting another mother in similar circumstances. It was from this woman that Alison found out about and was helped to apply for the Scottish Welfare Fund:

“It was just somebody that I’d actually met at CAMHS.⁷⁰ She was just a random mum, she felt my pain, and she gave me her mobile number, and I was at my wits end at that point, and I phoned her and it’s the best thing I’ve ever done was phone her because she felt like, I felt normal, I didn’t feel like I was losing the plot.”

Alison, Dundee

As described in Chapter Five, interviewees often described positive engagement with support and advice services which were made available at existing community spaces, such as community cafes or nurseries, as Kim explained above. Building relationships with named individual advice workers who were readily available and able to provide fast, flexible and empathetic support was very positive. For example, Natalie in Dundee was struggling to pay her rent to the council after moving on to Universal Credit and was very anxious about being evicted. She regularly attended a community café in the city where a council advice service, the Connect Team, ran a drop-in surgery. Natalie explained the comfort she found from being able to speak to someone she knew and trusted and be supported to approach the council about her concerns. It was clear that, had this advice not been available, Natalie would not have felt confident to address the problem herself, potentially leading to an escalation of the situation:

“I was panicked at the time and Michael was here, so I’d asked Michael ... I would just go back to Michael, ’cause he told me not to worry, that everything would be okay, and that he would be able to sort it out without me ... if

Michael hadn’t spoken to me, I probably would never have went in.”

Natalie, Dundee

Speaking to advice services also helped interviewees feel less isolated:

“It’s only when you get sort of chatting with workers that you know that you’re not out there on your own.”

Alison, Dundee

Where services were acknowledged as having played a role in helping bring about positive change for interviewees, trust and continuity of support was hugely important and provided reassurance:

“I’ve been dealing with the Carers Centre, they’re actually the only ones that stayed and remained consistent throughout, from losing my job to where I am now. Okay, it’s not maybe been regular contact, but I know they’re there in the background.”

Alison, Dundee

Some interviewees were recruited via a social prescribing service they had accessed through their GP practice. This service involved flexible, personalised support, depending on an individual's circumstances, often including support to apply for benefits, take up volunteering, training and education opportunities, and access a range of other specialist services. Interviewees who had worked with this service reported the hugely positive impact of the person-centred approach. Gordon reflected on the vital role which this service had played for him:

“I met Sarah [support worker], and she helped me get on the college course, and the CAB, she set that up and actually came with me ... and I wasn't getting any income at that time ... And Sarah got me on to the Men's Shed, which at that time gave me a reason to get up and dae something.”

Gordon, East Ayrshire

8.3 EVIDENCE OF NEGATIVE OR NO CHANGE FOLLOWING FOOD CRISIS

Interviewees whose circumstances were worse overall at follow-up interviews often reported that they had experienced no improvements to their financial situation, and as a result were facing more significant hardship. For example, Jenny, a lone parent who at first interview had recently stopped work for health reasons, later explained she was facing increased financial difficulties when she found herself paying back historical overpayments on her benefits:

“Everything is worse because I've got less money.”

Jenny, Dundee

As described in Chapter Two, prolonged food insecurity had a negative impact on physical and mental health. Interviewees associated deteriorated mental health with increased financial pressure and the experience of being out of work for an extended period of time. At his first interview, Geoff had been out of work for just over a year. At the second interview six weeks later, Geoff felt that, overall, his situation had become worse since the first meeting.

Still looking for work, his mental health had deteriorated and he was very socially isolated. He described how he felt:

“Not having a job, it really puts me doon, and I’m just sitting there and just panicking.”

Geoff, Fife

Being in work appeared to bring significant psychological, social, as well as financial benefits for many interviewees in this study. However, as discussed in Chapter Six these were undermined by the short-term nature of most job contracts. While for some moving into work had an immediate positive impact, for others the transition into work brought considerable financial and psychological pressures.

For example, at the time of her first interview, Hilary had been out of work for nine months, after she stopped being given shifts at her zero-hours contract cleaning job. A year later, Hilary had just started a new job at a petrol station. She described the costs involved in starting the job, including having to buy new glasses to allow her to operate a till, and paying for taxis to get home after a late shift when no public transport was available. To cover these costs, she had taken out a loan against her Universal Credit and described going entire 12-hour shifts

without eating because she could not afford to. After her first month of work, Hilary was worried about the impact her wages might have on her Universal Credit, as her new employer had given her more than her contracted hours. She was also very worried about the impact the transition might have on her housing, and whether her rent would still be paid. She reported a lack of clarity and communication from the jobcentre and her new employer and that this left her feeling very anxious and struggling to maintain the job.

Hilary’s story is presented on page 61.

8.4 ROLE OF SERVICES IN IMPEDING POSITIVE CHANGE

Jobcentre Plus is a government agency which is intended to support people to find employment and to administer claims for benefits. When it came to looking for work and navigating the benefits system, interviewees reported mixed experience of the support they received from the Jobcentre Plus offices and other employment services. For many, the jobcentre was not a place they felt comfortable going:

“It’s quite scary going in there, like security guards at the door. And all these people that just look down on you all the time.”

Sean, Dundee

Several interviewees were frustrated by what they reported to be a lack of consistent information and insufficient access to advice. As Duncan commented:

“I should be able to just walk into the jobcentre, and there should be somebody there to ask, but they say, ‘oh you’ll just have to phone the [Benefits] Centre’... It takes that long to get

through, and sometimes on the phone they cannae even tell you.”

Duncan, Dundee

Interviewees often described how the negative attitudes of Jobcentre Plus staff, and feeling judged and talked down to, affected their confidence when it came to applying for jobs. Harriet spoke about her husband’s experiences as a job seeker:

“It’s the way they’re asking, they total – they condescend, and they make him feel worse than he already does about himself.”

Harriet, Fife

Geoff expressed similar feelings when he described the reaction from a Jobcentre Plus worker when he asked for bus fares to get to a job interview, putting him off asking for help in the future:

“I did ask, but I wish I didnae ‘cause when I asked the guy, the way he looked at me, just like, ‘no, I’m no’ going to gi’ you it’ ... I think that puts me doon.”

Geoff, Fife

Duncan expressed similar frustrations when it came to accessing bus fares to enable him to travel to a new job:

“She said, ‘Can you come in and we’ll talk about the bus fares?’ Which is another thing, how the hell dae I get in? When I’ve nae money. I’m living seven miles away fae here.”

Duncan, Fife

Some interviewees spoke about challenges working with third-party agencies providing employability support and training for job seekers. The importance of privacy and, again, a lack of empathy from staff were highlighted:

“I hated going to [employability agency] as well because it was a one to one, but there were four other people having a one to one in the same room. So, everybody in the room would know that you never got that job or that you failed the interview and it wasn’t the best ... it seemed like they were just there for their pay cheque, they had no empathy, some of them had probably never been in the situation that you’d been in.”

Harriet, Fife

It was often highlighted that jobcentre staff struggled to provide clear information, particularly in relation to Universal Credit, which brought considerable anxiety to participants. Feedback from interviewees suggests that poor communication, and at times misinformation, about the implications of changes in policy and individual circumstances is a crucial factor in driving experiences of income crisis.

For example, two interviewees who had been on zero-hours contracts described being afraid of giving up their jobs, because they believed they would be sanctioned by the jobcentre. Hilary explained that, when she stopped being given any shifts at her zero-hours contract, she was given wrong advice by the jobcentre:

“I wasn’t allowed to sign on at the jobcentre because they said ‘Technically, you’re still employed, even although your name’s on a rota but you didn’t have any hours.’ .”

Hilary, East Ayrshire

In reality, Hilary would have been entitled to claim benefits when her hours were reduced. This misinformation meant Hilary was left with no income for an extended period of time, triggering chronic food insecurity.

While most negative experiences of services reported by interviewees related to the Jobcentre Plus offices and engagement with the DWP, more broadly, some challenges with other services were also reported. These included feeling that services were inaccessible:

“You cannae walk in nowadays [to social work], that doesnae happen.”

Jim, Fife

Alison, a lone parent with two disabled children, described her frustrations when a change in her benefits status led to a change in her eligibility for wider support:

“You had to sit and repeat your story and then hopefully tick the box. ‘Are you a carer?’ Well, yes I’m a carer but I don’t get the benefit. And the minute you say you don’t get the benefits, their face drops.”

Alison, Dundee

“Sometimes some of the services are actually damaging things for me rather than making it better. You know, and like one o’ the services in particular couldn’t help me ‘cause they were like, ‘Well I need to know what your income is,’ and I’m like, ‘Well until DWP tells me what my income is I can’t tell you’ .”

Alison, Dundee

Changeover of staff was also described as a challenge when it came to working with support services:

“The two contacts that I’ve contacted, that have been helpful, don’t work for the services anymore.”

Alison, Dundee

Chapter Seven highlighted that two interviewees had been living in homeless accommodation while in work. It was apparent from both that they felt there was more which the hostel staff could have done to provide them with advice and support.



For example, Harriet reflected that assumptions had been made about her ability to cope because she had a job. She spoke of the lack of support or advice she had received from staff in the hostel:



“I think they looked at us and because I was working that I didn’t need it. I never really got that much information about anything else. They were there if I had asked, but I think they just thought, ‘Oh, you’re working. You must not need it. You’re fine. You’ve got an income’ ... But it was only 12 hours, and it wasn’t that much, and I was spending the majority of my money on bus fare just getting to work.”

Harriet, Fife

8.5 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Analysis of the trajectories of the interviewees over the research period identified some important themes of positive and negative change. The longitudinal evidence here underlines the crucial importance of adequate and reliable incomes for addressing food insecurity.

Where interviewees had experienced positive change, their income was more secure, and they felt more in control of their finances, for example having reduced rent arrears and therefore alleviated fears of becoming homeless. For some, moving into work or training was also important for improving self-esteem and sense of purpose. With greater financial security came improved mental and physical health. However, the insecure nature of the labour market as experienced by interviewees in this study suggests that the benefits of moving into work may only be temporary. Having access to work cannot necessarily be seen as a reliable defence against income crisis and therefore food insecurity. By contrast, negative change over the research period was often because of prolonged periods of financial hardship, which compounded existing difficulties such as rent arrears. Extended periods looking for work appeared to have a particularly negative impact on the mental health of participants in this study.

Interviewees' experiences point to the importance of holistic person-centred approaches to service provision including support to access specialist advice and advocacy, in order to help achieve positive change. Building trusting and consistent relationships with named workers, often via universal services, created opportunities for preventative strategies, such as a Universal Credit roll-out awareness-raising session at Kim's nursery school, the personalised support Blair experienced at the jobcentre, or social prescribing by Gordon's GP.

The findings also underline the importance of services being approachable and accessible and treating people with dignity and respect. The findings also highlight the challenges which interviewees experienced when engaging with jobcentres, suggesting the need for their offices to be supportive spaces which provide reliable information and advice to people seeking work and needing to claim their entitlements. The findings here suggest that a lack of timely accurate advice can exacerbate food insecurity by creating additional barriers to accessing sustainable incomes.

9

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this longitudinal study provide valuable insights into the lived reality of food insecurity which have critical implications for the development of policies aimed at tackling it. Reflecting on the findings presented in the report, this chapter identifies the six key conclusions of this research and then outlines specific policy and practice recommendations for the UK Government, Scottish Government, and local authorities, as well as other public bodies and private sector employers.



CONCLUSIONS

1. FOOD INSECURITY HAS CONSIDERABLE PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS ON INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

Hunger, going days without eating, was a strikingly common experience for interviewees in this study. Such severe food insecurity was found to affect interviewees' physical health, mental health and overall sense of well-being.

These findings provide new evidence of the effects of poverty on health and wellbeing. For some in this study, food insecurity was found to exacerbate existing health conditions or make it more difficult to manage their symptoms.

The research also points to a close relationship between financial difficulties, food insecurity and mental health. Food insecurity left interviewees and their children feeling lonely, excluded, anxious, depressed, and at times even suicidal. Improvements in their financial situations, and therefore food security, appeared to lead to improvements in mental health, while extended periods of financial difficulties had a detrimental impact on the mental health of participants in this study. Struggling to afford to feed themselves and their families made it

very difficult for interviewees to look beyond their immediate needs or plan for the future.

Parents often described going without so that they could feed their children. Having to choose between eating or heating their homes was a common dilemma facing interviewees in this study, while falling into rent arrears was a frequent – and long-term – source of anxiety.

In highlighting the severe and often profoundly debilitating impacts of food insecurity on interviewees and their families, this research should serve as a stark reminder of the need for urgent, preventative action to ensure everyone has the security of being able to afford the food they need.

2. SHAME IS A KEY BARRIER TO SEEKING HELP IN A CRISIS, AND THE NATURE OF SUPPORT PROVIDED CAN MAKE A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE TO A PERSON'S OUTCOMES

The interviewees in this study expressed reluctance to access crisis support when facing food insecurity, and the sense of shame associated with asking for help is a key finding of this study. This finding echoes previous research on the use of emergency food aid.⁷¹ It was also common for interviewees in such circumstances to state that they did not see

themselves as deserving of help. Having ready access to cash in a crisis was seen as important, providing people with the choice and control to buy what they needed.

Experiences of interactions with service providers when facing crisis indicate that being shown empathy and treated with dignity were crucial for people's engagement with services. Not only do empathy and the promotion of dignity by services at these moments enable people to access the support they need in the short-term, they can lead to better longer-term outcomes by making people feel more confident to access support in the future. Conversely, the research suggested that some interactions with service providers can leave people facing food insecurity feeling an even greater sense of shame. Such negative experiences of services can put people off engaging in the future, thus leading to further isolation, debt and long-lasting effects on their physical and mental well-being.

Interviewees also described instances of being given inaccurate information, or having negative encounters with staff which put them off engaging with support again. The findings suggest that a lack of timely, accurate advice can exacerbate food insecurity by creating additional barriers to accessing sustainable incomes. By contrast, some interviewees described examples of being given appropriate advice and support at a crucial moment which had a positive impact. For example,

empathetic and timely support from advice services helped alleviate crisis and overcome wider benefit problems.

3. INADEQUATE AND INSECURE INCOMES FROM WORK AND SOCIAL SECURITY ARE THE KEY TRIGGERS FOR FOOD INSECURITY

The dynamic nature of food insecurity experiences is a key finding of this research. It was common for participants in this research to report having moved between degrees of severity of food insecurity as their income fluctuated over time. The longitudinal findings identify a close relationship between food insecurity and income insecurity, with interviewees reporting improved financial situations as crucial for improved food security, as well as for wider improvements in health and wellbeing. Participants whose incomes improved reported feeling more in control of their lives, better able to plan for the future and provide for their families.

Moving in and out of temporary work often meant moving in and out of severe food insecurity. These findings draw attention to the precarious nature of the labour market, specifically for agency workers and those on zero-hours or temporary contracts, as a key driver of food insecurity. Such conclusions echo concerns raised by the TUC regarding the widespread non-compliance with minimum standards among recruitment agencies.⁷²

Moving on to Universal Credit from work or other benefits, and having to wait at least five weeks for a payment, was also a common trigger for severe food insecurity for participants in this study. Interviewees were often reluctant to take out advance payments because they had to be repaid. Deductions on subsequent payments to pay back advances, rent arrears and other debts often extended the experience of food insecurity as incomes were insufficient to cover basic needs. These findings echo existing evidence of the role Universal Credit too often plays in exposing people to destitution, particularly because of the waiting time for initial payment and the high rate at which deductions are made.⁷³

For some, disability benefit reassessments also triggered food insecurity through a loss of income. This is particularly concerning given that elsewhere in the study food insecurity was found to exacerbate existing health problems. Wider research has shown that people with disabilities have been particularly adversely affected by welfare reform policies.⁷⁴

The findings in this report build on existing evidence of the role of precarious work and a weakened social security system in driving up levels of poverty and destitution in the UK.⁷⁵ These findings underline the vital role of adequate and secure incomes in protecting people from food insecurity. The study also highlights the need for adequate and stable incomes to enable individuals to build up savings

which might help to provide a buffer against sudden drops in income or unexpected expenditure and enable people to manage their priority payments, including rent, energy and food when experiencing a change in circumstances.

4. FAILURES OF EXISTING SOCIAL SECURITY AND WIDER PUBLIC SERVICES LEAVE PEOPLE WITH ADVERSE LIFE EXPERIENCES ACUTELY VULNERABLE TO FOOD INSECURITY

The longitudinal nature of this study enabled a detailed picture of people's lives to be developed, revealing the complexity and diversity of the challenges and priorities facing individuals and families. The personal stories presented here point to the resilience of individuals often facing multiple and compounding challenges.

The findings highlight critical events and transitions including: bereavement, childhood abuse, homelessness, leaving the armed forces and leaving care which often form the background to food insecurity experiences for individuals in this study and appeared to have on-going negative impacts. The long-term psychological and emotional effects of these experiences, combined with failings in the housing, social security and employment systems, left interviewees vulnerable

to food insecurity. The case studies presented in this report highlight numerous points of intervention where services could have provided better support to protect particularly vulnerable people from experiencing such protracted, worsening, difficulties.

It is well established that adverse life experiences have long-term implications for an individual's outcomes, while such experiences also disproportionately affect people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.⁷⁶ Consequently, those affected by distressing life experiences may be more likely to experience food insecurity. Such findings point to the importance of ensuring early intervention to help protect people from adverse life experiences in the first place, while ensuring adequate support to increase incomes and improve outcomes for vulnerable individuals at key transition points.

5. PEOPLE WITH ILL HEALTH AND CARING RESPONSIBILITIES ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO FOOD INSECURITY, WHICH IN TURN MAKES MANAGING THESE SITUATIONS EVEN MORE DIFFICULT

The findings also suggest some groups are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, and that food insecurity can have adverse impacts on

individuals already disproportionately affected by welfare reforms and carrying existing vulnerabilities.

The very high prevalence of ill health, particularly poor mental health, among participants in this study suggest that the social security system is failing to protect people with such conditions from food insecurity. The findings also point to the particular needs of people with long-term health conditions and their families. The longitudinal findings of this research suggest a dynamic relationship between ill health, particularly poor mental health, and food insecurity. Adequate and reliable incomes were shown to be essential for the management of long-term health conditions and appeared to help improve physical and mental health, while loss of income leading to food insecurity was found to have a detrimental impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of the participants in this study.

The findings also highlight the challenges facing lone parents in this study, the majority of whom were women, to achieve an adequate standard of living for their families while often trying to carry the burden of food insecurity for their whole household. These findings echo wider evidence of the impacts of national economic and social policy changes on this group.⁷⁷ By contrast, the difficulties facing single men in this study were commonly because of the precarious labour market, as well as conditionality and built-in delays within Universal Credit. Elsewhere younger single male households

have been identified as a group particularly adversely affected by welfare reforms.⁷⁸

It was also apparent that men and women interviewed differed in the sorts of support they accessed. The women interviewed were more likely to be engaged with informal support networks than the men. This was often because support was received via services they were accessing for their children, such as parents' groups.

6. PEOPLE MAKE USE OF INFORMAL NETWORKS AND NON-SPECIALIST SERVICES TO HELP RESOLVE FINANCIAL CHALLENGES DRIVING FOOD INSECURITY

Interviewees often learnt about and were helped to access services or apply for entitlements via informal networks or professionals with whom they had developed relationships of trust and respect. Such relationships were often developed in settings which offered an opportunity for social interaction and participation, and which recognised people as community members rather than clients.

For interviewees in this study, community settings, including community cafes and meal services, provided important spaces for socialising and engaging with other community members as well as advice and wider services. For some in acutely

food insecure situations, such settings also served as a vital lifeline. It was often in these spaces that interviewees developed relationships with staff and felt comfortable to engage with specialist advice and other services provided on a drop-in basis.

The experiences of interviewees in this study highlight the crucial role played by a wide range of services which might not necessarily see themselves at the forefront of tackling food insecurity including health, education, childcare, housing, advice and community organisations. For example, information and support around benefit changes provided by a trusted worker at a mother and toddler group. The findings suggest the value of providing income maximisation and welfare rights advice via services and settings that people are already accessing for other reasons.

These findings point to the need for services to work together to develop coordinated and person-centred strategies to address food insecurity premised on dignity and respect, and which are alert to changes in an individual's financial circumstances, providing ready access to income maximisation and welfare rights advice and advocacy support. The experiences of participants in this study also highlight the importance of aligning adequate and timely financial assistance with other services and supports to help people tackle their other life challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have clear implications for the development of preventative solutions to food insecurity and better crisis responses, including the need to:

- Ensure adequate and secure incomes;
- Improve dignified access to cash and advice in a crisis; and
- Deliver holistic, empathetic public services which treat people with kindness and respect.
- Specific policy recommendations stemming from this research and informed by the wider work of A Menu for Change are outlined below.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT:

To ensure adequate and reliable incomes as a preventative strategy to addressing food insecurity, the UK Government should:

- Restore the value of key benefits and uprate all benefits in line with inflation, thus supporting people to meet their living costs and help build resilience to income shocks;
- Improve the incomes families receive from social security by removing the two-child limit and benefit cap;
- Provide better support for people who develop ill-health to remain in the labour market, and protect them from income crisis when they are unable to do so;
- Improve job security by banning exploitative zero-hours contracts and enforcing compliance with minimum employment standards among employers and recruitment agencies;
- Increase the National Living Wage to the Real Living Wage.

Beyond the need for wide scale reforms to ensure everyone has a sustainable income, the findings of this report highlight the importance of improving the current system to enable social security payments to serve as a responsive and reliable safety net. An improved system should recognise current insecurities in the labour market so that when people transition onto or between benefits, adequate protection is in place to prevent a change in circumstances from causing people to fall into crisis. To achieve this, the UK Government should:

- Eliminate measures that create shocks to consistent income, including removing the five-week wait for initial Universal Credit payments entirely by making advance payments non-repayable;
- Further reduce the maximum level at which deductions are made from Universal Credit payments so that incomes always protect people from destitution;⁷⁹
- Improve communication received from the DWP and Jobcentre Plus offices so people know why payment decisions have been made and how they can challenge a decision;
- Improve the quality of employment support and end in-work conditionality so that people are better equipped to gain sustainable work.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT:

While much of the power to improve the incomes which people receive through work and income replacement benefits lies with the UK Government, there are actions the Scottish Government can take to help ensure everyone in Scotland has an adequate income and can afford the food they need. These include steps to:

- Ensure the new Scottish Child Payment achieves its objective of reducing child poverty⁸⁰ while recognising the groups in need who will miss out on this help, and work towards new support which would help protect all households from food insecurity;
- Use public sector procurement to deliver fair work and invest in low-paid sectors to drive improvements in working conditions while ensuring initiatives to promote good practice amongst employers in Scotland are sufficiently robust and well-resourced to achieve this objective;
- Ensure devolved employability programmes are designed to provide person-centred support to those furthest from the labour market recognising the significant barriers individuals face, including those with caring responsibilities;

- Invest in welfare rights advice and advocacy support services and increase their availability via public services and in community settings;
- Enshrine the right to food in Scots law to give enhanced day-to-day effect to this international human rights law in Scotland, and then inform and empower people in Scotland to claim this right;
- Invest in community services which provide food in conjunction with access to wider advice and support services as part of social activity; and
- Explore the role of income smoothing services to reduce vulnerability to income shocks.

This report provides specific learning on the role of the Scottish Welfare Fund as a source of crisis support. To strengthen the Scottish Welfare Fund as an effective safety net in a crisis, the Scottish Government should⁸¹:

- Embed the principles of dignity and respect, as contained in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, in the delivery of Scottish Welfare Fund;
- Increase investment in the administration budget to improve the capacity of local staff to provide timely and holistic support to applicants, referring them to advice services where appropriate;

- Ensure the Scottish Welfare Fund is sufficiently advertised so people know when and how they can access it;
- Ensure people always have access to cash in a crisis by reviewing the guidance which suggests limiting support to three awards in a 12-month period unless exceptional circumstances apply; and
- Increase the programme budget – the money distributed to claimants – in line with the anticipated increase in demand created by enhanced knowledge about the Scottish Welfare Fund and the removal of barriers to access it.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT, LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND OTHER PUBLIC BODIES:

The findings in this study highlight the relevance of food insecurity to a wide range of services and the importance of a holistic, person-centred approach to service design and delivery to improve people's outcomes. We see evidence of the new Social Security Scotland Agency adopting this approach, which considers people's wider needs and welcome this. In this context, there is a role for the Scottish Government, local authorities and other public bodies to:

- Embed principles of investment, dignity and respect throughout public services and proactively communicate a rights-based approach to service delivery;
- Encourage cross-sectoral working on food insecurity, recognising its relevance to health, social care, housing and advice service design and delivery and the importance of holistic, person-centred ways of working;
- Improve referral pathways between statutory, voluntary and community services, so people have ready access to welfare rights advice and income maximisation opportunities; and

Invest in the availability of welfare rights advice and advocacy support in community-based settings and via public services like schools and GP surgeries, drawing on the evidence of life events that increase vulnerability to income crisis.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS:

There are also clear steps which employers should take to protect their staff from food insecurity, including:

- Paying at least the Real Living Wage to all staff;
- Ensuring all staff have guaranteed hours and predictable rotas;
- Ensuring high levels of employment standards and that all staff are aware of their rights;
- Providing agency workers with the right to request direct employment after 12 weeks⁸²; and
- Making welfare rights advice available to staff so they know what they are entitled to while in work and understand the options when a job contract ends.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This research provides new evidence of the drivers of food insecurity for people living in Scotland today, and the often profoundly debilitating impact this has. By foregrounding their voices, it also demonstrates the humanity and determination of people for whom such severe difficulties are often a daily reality. This longitudinal study also identifies that positive change is possible and that food insecurity is preventable.

The recommendations outlined in this chapter are specific actions which can be taken now to end food insecurity. Such steps would help Scotland deliver on its commitment to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal Two - Zero Hunger and to respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights. These actions are also crucial to achieving Scotland's national objectives as contained within the National Performance Framework, including the vision of eradicating poverty and hunger and ensuring resilient, vibrant communities. These changes can be achieved through a progressive taxation system that recognises public services and social security are an investment in the health and wellbeing of the people of Scotland.

In telling their stories and experiences, the participants in this study also shared their hopes for change and their messages to people in positions of power. It was common for interviewees to say they

felt politicians and other decision-makers lacked empathy or understanding of the realities facing people experiencing poverty. It is hoped that this report will help inform those in power of these realities, provoke empathy, and inspire action. Henry explained his sense of the need for people at all levels to come together to achieve change:



“I wish I was in a high position, that my word went. But I can’t do it on my own... I have written to the council about my complaints. I’ve even written to one of our councillors. But then the councillors can’t do it on their own either. They need the rest of the country with them”

Henry, Fife



ENDNOTES

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