Helping the Most Vulnerable Families with Access to Food During COVID-19

GOOD FOOD OXFORD REPORT TO FOOD POWER/ UNICEF UK – Generation COVID Funding

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FOOD *Power*

Healthy, fair, sustainable and delicious food for Oxfordshire

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Play:Full Littlemore: Integrating Food and Nutrition into Enrichment Activities

Good Food Oxford approached Growing Minds to collaborate on a project in Littlemore, an area of Oxford with high levels of deprivation and little access to community enterprises, such as larders or community centres. Growing Minds aims to improve school readiness, and were already working with Home-Start, which provides one-to-one support to vulnerable families, and PEEP Learning Together, which focuses on Early Learning and closing the attainment gap. They work collaboratively with vulnerable families, integrating home-learning techniques with more general support. Good Food Oxford spoke with the Growing Minds Coordinator about collaborating on a Play:Full project which would integrate food and nutrition into their work. The local school was also involved in delivering this project.

A Covid-secure, distanced, home-based project was established, involving 12 families. These families represent 45 people, including 25 children, who attended the project for 6 weeks. This means 270 meals were provided in the 6 week period. Based on the survey completed by 9 of the participating families, 60% of the families had at least one child eligible for free school meals. A further 10% of families only had children who were too young to be eligible for free school meals. 50% of the families do not have adequate internet access for online shopping, and 40% had experienced a drop in income, due to losing employment (30%), having a reduction in pay or hours (40%), or having benefit payments reduced (10%). 50% of households had at least one child with a disability, 33% were single adult households and 10% were households where the children were being raised by a kinship carer. 70% identified as being white and 30% preferred not to say.

In an interview carried out for this report, the Play:Full Coordinator, who is also the Growing Minds Coordinator for Home-Start, commented that running a project in lockdown, rather than a general half-term holiday project, made it easier to specifically target those families that were most in need, and on whom they would be able to have the most impact. The Play:Full project enabled Growing Minds to

engage with families that had previously not engaged via Zoom, as it gave them a reason to get involved. They were then able to deliver their Home-Start parenting support to these families using cooking as a way to explore family dynamics and issues. These families received weekly recipe kits for a nutritious meal, were sent a video instructing them how to cook the meal, and then all took part in a group follow-up Zoom call to provide peer support and share their successes. Care was taken to be adaptable to different needs, for example videos demonstrated tin-foil lids where participants lacked fitted pan lids, ingredients were measured out in mugs in case families had no scales, and recipe cards were designed to cater for parents who had difficulty reading. All the information sheets were laminated to provide a lasting set of recipes and advice for the participating families.

Good Food Oxford also contributed to the food parcels and provided information leaflets including the Good Food Cooking Toolkit to the families, as well as supplying several pieces of equipment to the participants:

> "And then there was the slow cookers that went out... and they went down incredibly well. They made such a positive impact on most of my mums; now they use those slow cookers at least two or three times a week, which is really, really positive and it's just making their food go further."
>
> –Play:Full Coordinator

The approach was centred on creating a community, peer-support network, and also focused on "celebrating what's already being achieved, because I think sometimes as a mum, you don't realise that. It's really good to unpick what the family is already doing and say, 'Well, listen, you're already doing that. That's great. Can we try and build on it by adding these next building blocks?" (Play:Full Coordinator).

As well as the regular Zoom meetings, a WhatsApp group was set-up for the participating families to support one another, to ask questions and to access advice from the Coordinator, such as tips on how to make a recipe go further. This messaging group was reported to be very successful, and the Coordinator described

how families have since bumped into each other outdoors and made plans to keep in touch.

All nine of the participants that completed a post-project review survey said the videos were helpful, several emphasising that seeing another family cooking the recipe was nice and made them see how easy it could be. Other comments on the videos include:

> "Really miss them… (the) visual aid was really important."

> "Easy to follow, good to have step by step as reading is a challenge."

All but one of the respondents commented on how much they enjoyed being in a group with other families. All but one respondent said that they have now changed their cooking habits, including cooking with their children more, cooking from scratch, eating fewer takeaways and involving children in healthy food choices. All but one said they would continue with the Play:Full project if it was extended.

The Head Teacher of the local school reported that they would take part in another Play:Full project, and that they would recommend it to other organisations. They said:

> "I hope the scheme grows. I think it is a really useful resource for families who may not know how to shop within a budget and prepare family meals."

To conclude, the project was not able to reach a broad base of children, but instead it was possible to focus resources very specifically on a group of families known to be vulnerable. The Play:Full project nurtured a supportive peer group, with evidence that lasting relationships were established between families. The majority of families involved have changed their cooking habits as a result of the project. Learning materials and recipes provided throughout the project will provide on-going sources of information for the families to refer to; and equipment, such as slow cookers

provided by Good Food Oxford have had continued positive impacts on several of the families involved.

Food Poverty Training – Dignity and Empowerment in Delivery

> "Very clear and informative training – really helpful and interesting to get so much input from people across the board."

Introduction

As laid out in the funding application, Good Food Oxford delivered ten sessions of Food Poverty Training to volunteers from community foodbanks, larders, fridges and other food services between November 2020 and January 2021. The content included understanding food poverty, dignity, having conversations about food, nutrition and infant feeding, Healthy Start Vouchers, Free School Meals and sign-posting to other support services. 40 hours of external voluntary work went into the administration of the course.

The ambition was to reach 75 volunteers from 15 organisations, to improve services for up to 400 families per week. This was exceeded. 121 individuals attended the Food Poverty Training, from at least 55 organisations. Based on survey data from participants, a conservative estimate of the number of children who will receive an improved service as a result is at least 3,000, but this figure may be over 3,800.

Following the training attendees received copies of GFO's Food Insecurity Toolkit as a handy reminder of the key concepts covered in the training.

The following sections summarise the findings from feedback forms filled-out by the participants of the Food Poverty Training sessions.

Ability to Deal with Food Poverty

The average score participants gave themselves for their ability to deal with food poverty before the training session was 2.5 out of 5. This increased to an average of 4.1 out of 5 following the training, an increase of 1.6 out of 5, or 63%. The following chart illustrates this change in the participant's self-assessed score.

Self-assessed ability to deal with food poverty, before and after training, on a scale of 0-5

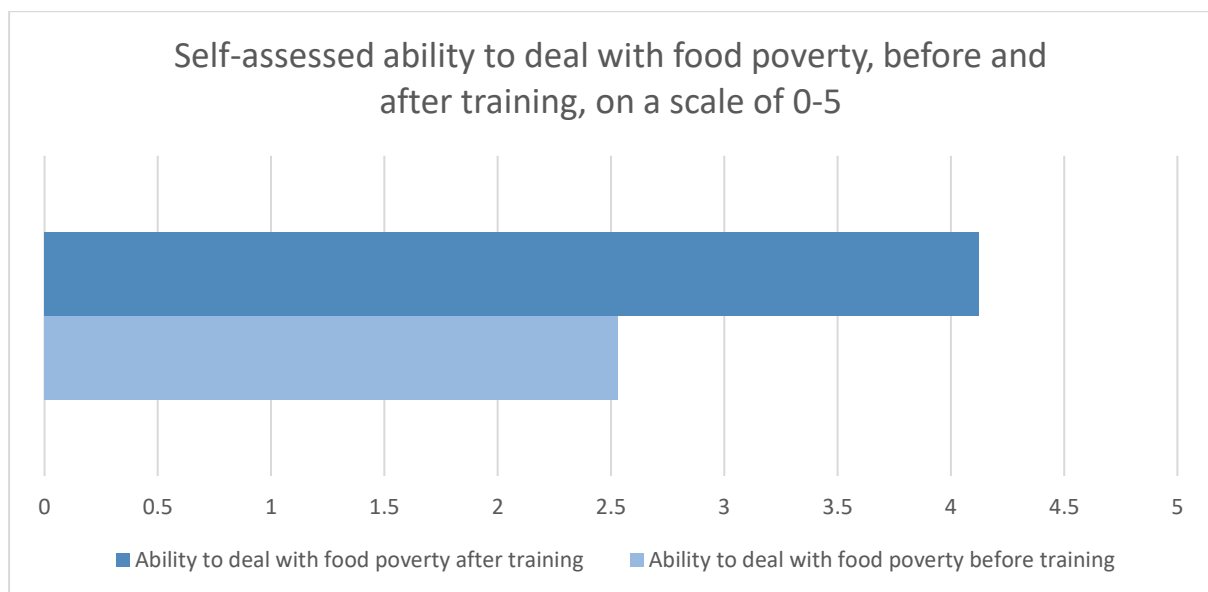■ Ability to deal with food poverty after training   ■ Ability to deal with food poverty before training

Figure 1: Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 0 ("Not so good") to 5 ("Very good indeed") their ability to deal with food poverty, before and after the training provided.

The aims of the training were to:

1. Understand the international definitions and drivers of food poverty
2. Reflect on how food poverty presents in participants' work
3. Share best practice responses
4. Learn how to signpost most effectively in Oxfordshire

5. Get informed about national and local policy work

The participants were satisfied that the training session met these aims, ranking it on average 4.4 out of 5 (where 5 = that the aims were fully met) or 89%.

Service Delivery

The participants were asked to reflect on how their organisation/project was delivering on the following aspects of service delivery, "nutrition standards, infant feeding, food safety, being COVID secure, safeguarding, data protection, whistleblowing," and where they might be able to improve their provision.

There was a range of results, many specific to the individual projects/organisations, and many felt that they already provided these services. Three consistent themes were health and nutrition, signposting services, and infant feeding. 23% of participants said specifically they now planned to improve their attention to health and nutrition in their service provision, 13% plan to improve their awareness of supporting services that they could signpost to their clients, and 12% plan to actively improve their information provision for infant feeding.

Dignity

This aspect of the training was based on the Nourish Scotland Dignity Programme. Participants were asked to reflect on how they deliver 'dignity principles', such as "a sense of control, able to take part in community life, nourished and supported, involved in decision-making, valued and able to contribute," and to comment on how they might improve.

Though responses were again varied and specific to each project, better communication and encouraging a sense of community were common themes in participants' feedback. 18% commented that they could change or improve how they communicate with clients, for example through taking more time to understand their needs or by formalising feedback processes. 15% mentioned the importance of

connecting clients with the community, or making them feel part of a community. This is illustrated in some of the following quotes:

> "We feel that we do quite well to meet these aspects of dignity however we could actually ask our service users if they feel the same and more formally consult with them on how we run our service."

> "What we have found helpful is trying to foster a personal relationship with the recipients, making sure that their voice is heard and they feel an interpersonal connection"

> "More promotion of community resources so residents can have the option to be involved in community life."

Outcomes

When asked which was the most useful part of the training, 50% of participants explicitly mentioned meeting people from other local services and/or sharing experiences with other local providers. 13% were pleased to know more about signposting and 8% were glad to have learnt about dignity in the context of food poverty.

This suggests there will now be better connections between support services for families in the area, across a range of different services.

Conclusion

Good Food Oxford ran 10 Food Poverty Training sessions, attended by a total of 121 individuals whose organisations together provide services to more than 3,000 children (as well as adults). The aims of the training sessions were satisfied, and the participants' self-assessed ability to deal with food poverty was greatly improved. There was a strong focus on dignity, connecting with different types of support for

families, and many of the organisations work with the most vulnerable children and families.

Community Food Networks

Good Food Oxford held the first Community Food Networks (CFNs) meetings in July 2020, expanding the focus from Oxford to the entire county of Oxfordshire. These meetings are officially held every 8 weeks, but due to the pressing demands of the COVID-19 response, are being held every 3-4 weeks. The ambition was for 25 groups to regularly attend the meetings, which could improve services for up to 625 families a week. This was exceeded: 109 individuals, representing 78 organisations have attended the CFN meetings, suggesting services are being improved for 1950 families (assuming each organisation has an average reach of 25 families). The organisations involved include community food services, the City and District Councils, voluntary groups, and local food businesses. The aims of the Networks are to create a shared understanding of local need, to collaborate across resources, funding and training, and to share best practice whilst connecting the districts to the countywide agenda of establishing a resilient and sustainable food system.

Organisations were able to reach the most vulnerable children and families, and different support services were connected with one another. These Networks have developed the City and District Councils' understanding of community food provision in their localities, and enabled them to tap into local knowledge of how to support these services and where to allocate resources. Through these Networks, community food services have had the opportunity to learn from one another, get immediate responses to their needs, and share critical emotional support for staff given the demanding and unprecedented circumstances. The meetings have facilitated resources, such as surplus food, household goods, and means of transport, to be allocated quickly and efficiently to those struggling to meet their basic needs during the Covid-19 crisis. Together, this has facilitated a more effective response to the impacts of Covid-19 on the local food system, ensuring that assistance was given where it was needed. GFO continues to play an active role.

Community Food Services Map
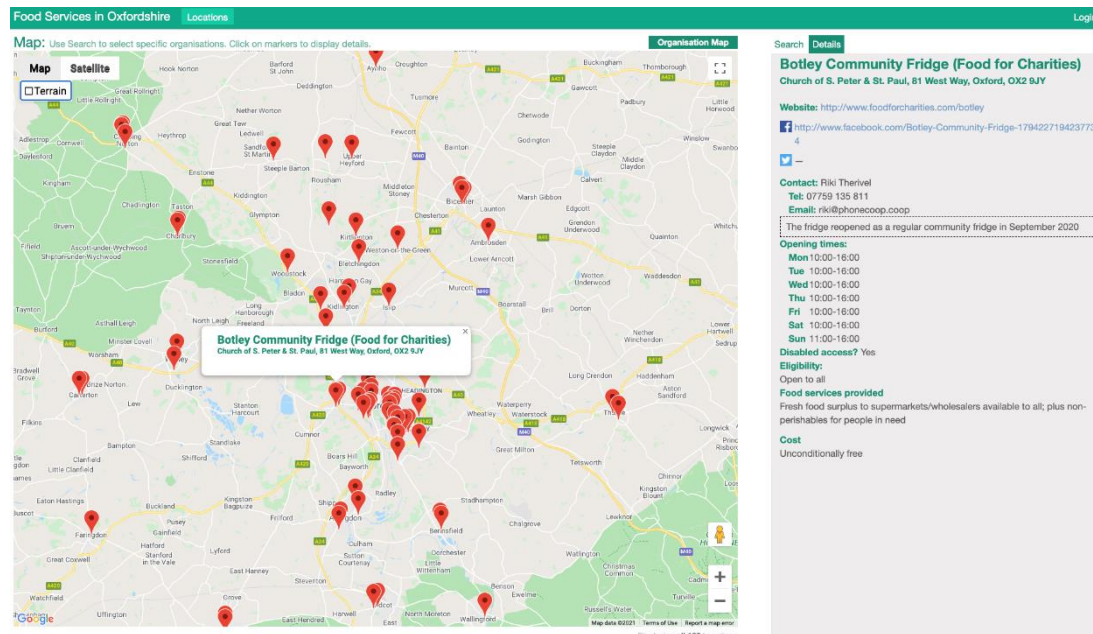
Good Food Oxford aimed to continue to edit and update Oxfordshire's Food Services Map www.goodfoodoxford.org/foodmap, and to add a new postcode search function to enable people to find services that cover their area. They planned to have 6,000 more views of the map, with the aim to signpost 300 more families.

From its first views on 14th July 2020 up to the 25th January 2021, there were a total of 8,356 views on the new community food services map, and approximately 6,759 views of an older version of the map.[1] If just 5% of these interactions represent someone in need of services, and half of those are families with children, then an estimated 378 families have been signposted, if not directly supported. Anecdotally, Good Food Oxford know that many people viewing the map are service providers and frontline professionals who may be accessing the map to signpost a number of different families. Consequently, these numbers may be even higher.

Since Oct 2020 Good Food Oxford had additional resources loaned to them to support with updating details on the community food services map, firstly with

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[1] The older version of the map remains active as it is still used, though it provides a link to the new service.

service changes over half term (following announcement that Free School Meal vouchers would not continue during half term) and then with Christmas plans. Theoretically, services update their own details but in reality often do not have the time and resource to do this. Given the urgency, Good Food Oxford secured additional resources to carry out the October Half Term and Christmas updates on behalf of the services. Loaned resources came from the County Council, who provided 5 days; Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action, who provided 5 days; and Community First Oxfordshire, who provided 2 days. Good Food Oxford also secured 2 resources (1 full time equivalent) from Oxfordshire County Council, from April to September, to assist with the migration from the old map to the new map, for example by checking and cleaning data on service providers.
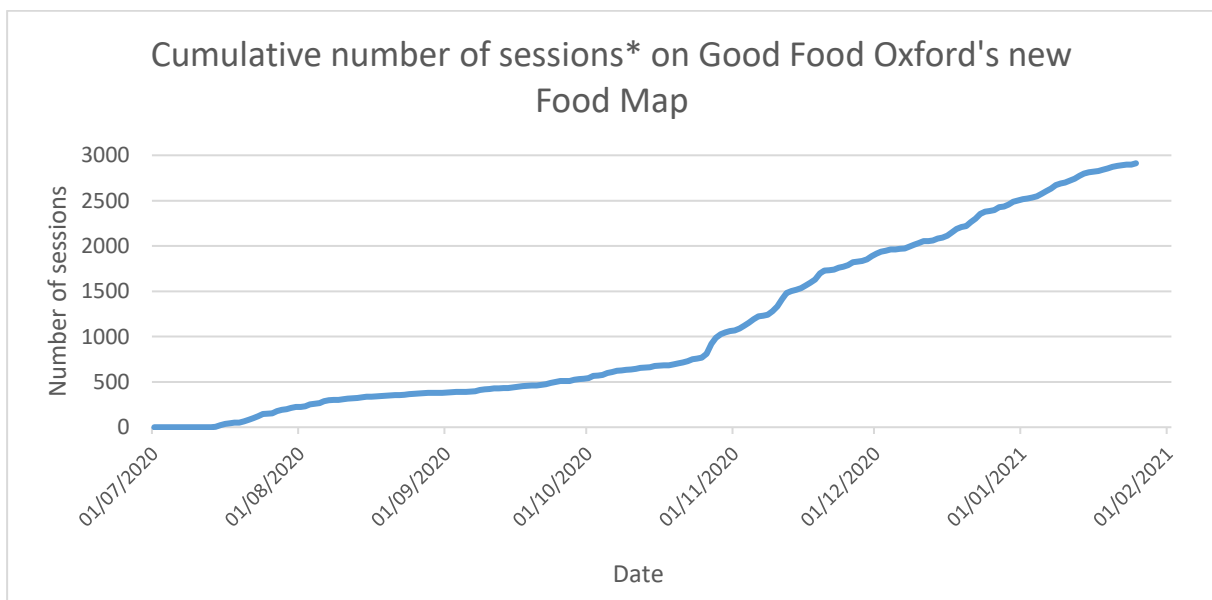

Figure 2: Cumulative number of sessions on Good Food Oxford's new community food services map, since its launch.

Figure 2 shows how Good Food Oxford's new community food services continues to see a steady flow of users.
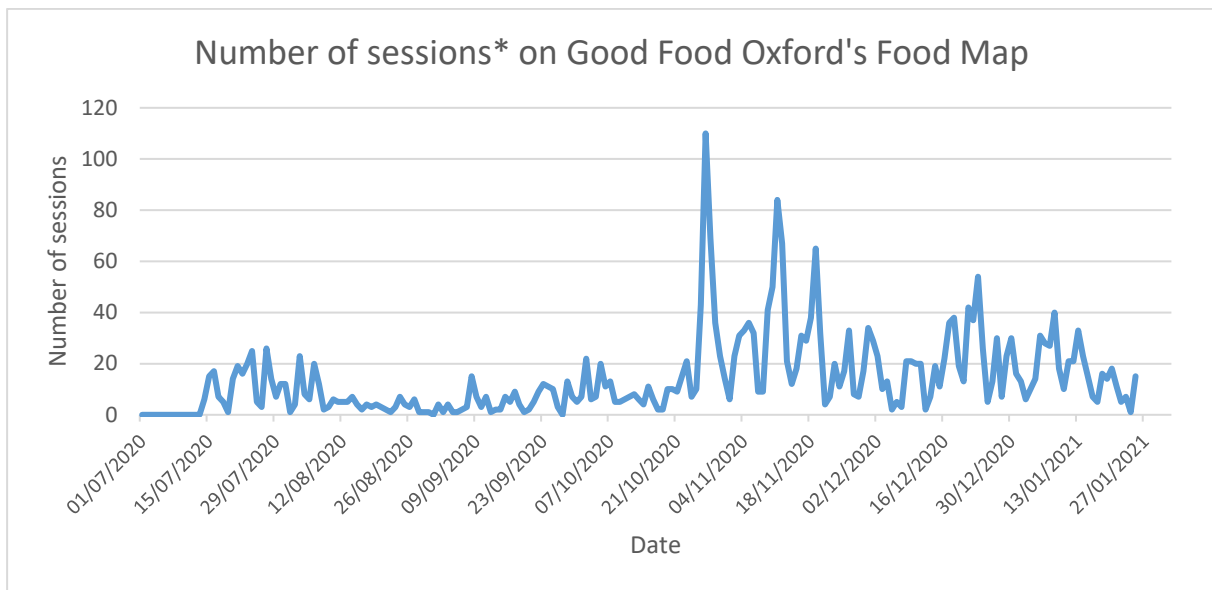
Figure 3: Daily number of sessions on Good Food Oxford's new community food services map, since its launch.

Figure 3 illustrates the daily usage of the new community food services map. The greatest peak in usage was 110 sessions2 in a single day on the 27th October 2020, during the half-term school holidays. Usage was higher than average across the whole nine days of the half term holidays, with an average of 35 sessions daily.

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2 Google analytics defines sessions as "a group of user interactions with your website that take place within a given time frame. For example a single session can contain multiple page views."