



Collective Action to Address Food Poverty in Oxfordshire: What Have We Learned So Far?

GOOD FOOD OXFORD EVALUATION REPORT

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Healthy, fair, sustainable and delicious food for Oxfordshire
www.goodfoodoxford.org

**If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.
(African proverb)**

Oxford Food Access Alliance and Oxfordshire Community Food Networks

The Oxford Food Access Alliance was funded by Food Power¹ and convened by Good Food Oxford (GFO) from early 2018 until early 2020. Its central aims were to empower local communities and organisations in the city of Oxford to reduce food poverty, and to support an appropriate local policy response to food poverty. It pursued these aims by facilitating dialogue on root causes and potential solutions to food poverty among service providers, policymakers, and people with lived experience of food poverty (known as experts by experience), and by supporting the development of food-related community initiatives.

The Alliance was a closed group of individuals who were invited for their interest and experience in addressing food poverty. There were 18 members from 11 organisations. Bi-monthly meetings were held, and members were invited to attend conferences and training courses, and to visit community initiatives around the country. The number of members actively involved fluctuated over time, although GFO kept information flowing among members throughout.

The Alliance contributed to the development of several community initiatives in the city: community fridges and larders in Blackbird Leys, Botley and Cutteslowe; a project to address holiday hunger in Cutteslowe; and food provision in a safe space for homeless women. An earlier evaluation report of the Alliance² provided evidence that the Blackbird Leys fridge and larder helped to increase access to, and lower the cost of, a variety of foods for vulnerable groups. The Alliance also contributed to local and national campaigns aimed at improving policy responses to food poverty.

¹ Food Power is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and implemented by [Sustain](#) and [Church Action on Poverty](#).

² Wells, 2020. Oxford's Food Access Alliance: Striving together to reduce local food poverty and support local policy to develop a fair and sustainable food system for Oxford. A report for Good Food Oxford. September 2020.

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GFO was starting to rethink its support for collective action in early 2020. And then came COVID-19. The pandemic threw the existence and depth of food poverty in Oxfordshire into sharp relief. The County Council asked GFO to conduct research on community food services – who was doing what and where. The research revealed the complex and dynamic system of community food provision which had rapidly emerged in response to the pandemic, with a threefold increase in users since the start of the pandemic, a large proportion of whom had not used food services before the pandemic. GFO recommended setting up district-level networks and linking them into countywide initiatives.

The council agreed, and GFO convened the first **Community Food Networks (CFNs)** meeting in July 2020. The focus shifted from the city of Oxford to the whole county of Oxfordshire. Since then, 109 individuals from 78 organisations from across the county – community food services, the city and district councils, voluntary groups, and local food businesses – have attended regular³ district-level Network meetings. The core aims of the Networks are to develop shared understanding of local need, collaborate on resources, funding and training, and share best practice, while linking the districts into the countywide agenda for the development of a resilient and sustainable food system. The Networks have allowed the district and city councils to tap into local knowledge and understand how to support community food services. For service providers, the Networks have provided a forum in which to learn from each other and get immediate and practical responses to their services' needs, as well as providing critical emotional support for staff who have supported others living through crises.

In this report we highlight key learning from GFO's experience supporting the Alliance, and early learning from the Networks. The learning is based on insights from interviews and a focus group with GFO staff and members of the Alliance and the Networks. At the end of the report, we reflect on what we have learned and how that can inform future initiatives. A more comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the CFNs may be valuable around mid-2022, by which time they will have been operating for two years.

³ Network meetings are officially every 8 weeks, but currently occur more frequently (every 3-4 weeks) due to the pressing needs of the COVID response.

Key Lessons

Same Goal, Adaptive Strategies

“Sometimes it’s about being opportunistic,
see where the energy is, let’s go there.”
(GFO staff member)

GFO’s central aim has remained constant over time – to reduce food poverty by enabling access to healthy and sustainable food for all in Oxfordshire. Its approaches to pursuing the goal have evolved over time in response to changing circumstances, opportunities and needs. This is

Your plan



Reality



most evident in the transition from the Alliance to the Network. The Alliance was an important forum in which to initiate much-needed conversations around food poverty in Oxford, and its members contributed to a number of important community initiatives. But by early 2020, there was a feeling that the Alliance was losing momentum – attendance at meetings was dwindling, and several recruitment drives had failed to bring in new energy. The emergence of COVID-19 sped up what was perhaps anyway inevitable. The immediate effects of the pandemic created an urgent need to coordinate the efforts of a large number of service providers and the district councils in order to maintain and extend food access to people struggling due to the dire economic fallout of lockdowns.

The ways in which GFO supported the Alliance were also adaptive, evolving over time in response to Alliance members’ needs and priorities. Initial thinking was to convene bi-monthly meetings as a forum for dialogue among experts by experience, service providers and policymakers, and to set up one or more new community-run initiatives based on learning from projects in other parts of the country. But attendance at meetings was low, often with the same handful of people coming together, and a few others attending sporadically. There were a number of reasons for this. Members were selected because they were known to be active in the sector – which meant

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that they were busy people involved in multiple initiatives. It was difficult to find an agreed time that was convenient for all members. And the needs of different groups were sometimes in tension – bringing experts by experience into the Alliance required slow and careful work to build trust and confidence, but the slow pace frustrated some professionals, who wanted to see tangible results more quickly.

GFO adapted by shifting to other forms of engagement: more one-to-one meetings with members and using email to keep those unable to attend in the loop. It also found that the most effective way of reaching decision-makers was to go to them at times that fit with their schedules, and to report on the Alliance's work at other forums attended by decision-makers, rather than expecting decision-makers to fit in with the Alliance's meeting schedule.

The idea of developing new community initiatives was also adapted over time. Rather than plan and initiate a new initiative from scratch, it became apparent that a more effective approach was to add value to existing efforts in which Alliance members were involved, ensuring that their development benefitted from the ideas and energy which came from Alliance discussions and visits to other projects.

GFO's adaptive response has paid off. Despite the challenges of trying to coalesce a disparate group of individuals under the Alliance umbrella, the work of the Alliance served to kindle the flame of collective action on food poverty in Oxford at a time when there was little attention to the issue. That work meant that when the pandemic hit, both GFO and the Alliance members were already well-grounded in their understanding of what was working, and able to rapidly convene a much larger group to step up the necessary response. Food has moved up the policy agenda, and there is awareness among decision-makers of the need to embed food into existing policy frameworks such as those addressing healthy weight and climate action.

Using Lived Experience to Improve Services

“I got ideas, and especially the idea of larders. Because I learned from the experts by experience that idea of pride, that people are happy to pay a reasonable amount to get choice rather than handouts.” (Alliance service provider)

A key tenet of the Alliance was to use lived experience to directly inform and improve service delivery. It aimed to do this by creating a forum in which individuals who would otherwise be unlikely to meet – individuals with lived experience of food poverty, service providers and decision-makers



interested in addressing food poverty – could come together to listen to and understand each other’s perspectives, and use that knowledge to inform their work.

The approach was effective in a number of tangible ways. The expansion of community larders in the Oxford area, as an alternative to food banks and fridges, was underpinned by a new appreciation of the desire of some people accessing assistance to contribute financially rather than to accept handouts, and in turn get access to a greater choice of foods. Experts by experience also identified a serious gap in service provision in an area of Oxford generally considered to be affluent. That gap has since been filled by the establishment of a larder and a holiday hunger project in the Cutteslowe neighbourhood. The voices of those with lived experience also informed the content of GFO’s food poverty training, helping to extend their reach among the many professionals who have attended the training course.

The Alliance’s work with experts by experience also generated less tangible, indirect benefits which will be sustained well beyond the life of the Alliance. It gave experts by experiences exposure to new people, environments, and ideas, and allowed them to build new skills and confidence that have value to them as individuals, while empowering them to use their stories to inform the sector locally and nationally. One of the Alliance’s experts by experience now

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contributes to GFO's agenda by sitting on GFO's steering group, as well as informing national research and action by participating in a Church Action on Poverty forum. She says she would not have had the confidence to participate in these forums prior to her work with the Alliance. She also attributes getting a job with a local non-profit to the experience she gained in the Alliance, alongside other volunteering experience.

Key to this approach was ensuring the meaningful engagement of individuals with lived experience of food poverty in the Alliance. This was not without its challenges. It required a slow and careful process to build trusting relationships and overcome the feelings of mistrust among some, based on past experiences when their opinions were not respected or taken into account. Recognising that "if you want to go far, [it's better to] go together", GFO chose to go with the slower pace of work that this process required, so that everyone felt included. This in turn meant holding the tension between the needs of this group, and the desire of some professionals to work at a faster pace and see tangible results more quickly.

Engaging experts by experience also required the skill to create an environment in which they felt comfortable and could gain the confidence to voice their opinions and share their experiences without fear of shame or stigma. GFO staff, as convenors, found that they needed to 'unlearn' some of their 'usual' ways of working, and sometimes follow rather than lead. They found that some of the most constructive ideas emerged during informal, unstructured moments over a shared meal or while travelling to and from other projects, rather than when trying to follow pre-determined agendas, and that sometimes all they needed to do was to invest small resources to move the group's enthusiasm forward.

Keeping experts by experience consistently engaged was also challenging. Many were juggling multiple and competing demands on their time and energy – jobs, childcare and/or care of other family members, anxiety in social settings, and their own mental and physical health. Practical strategies such as reimbursing childcare and transport costs were insufficient to lower these barriers, and the offer of some form of compensation for people's time was turned down by experts by experiences who took pride in volunteering their time. By early 2020 only three of the original seven experts by experience were still consistently involved, placing a burden on those still able to engage.

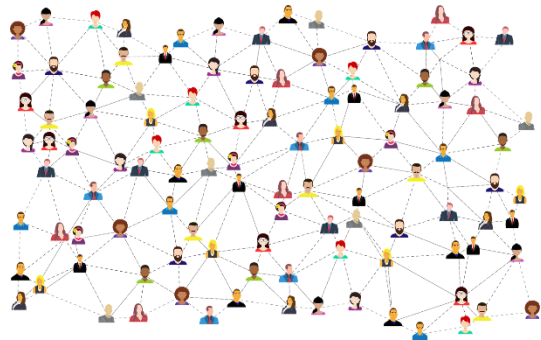
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Experts by experiences are not directly involved in CFN meetings. But the effectiveness, demonstrated by the Alliance, of using lived experience to improve services is recognised by Network members, who regularly bring stories from service users to inform Network discussions and decisions.

Network, Network, Network

“Those with lived experience valued the connections to others with the same experience from across the country – knowing there’s a wider national experience like the(irs)...” (GFO staff)

The value of networking has been apparent throughout GFO’s work with the Alliance and the CFNs. The Oxford Alliance was just one of many similar Alliances which came together under the Food Power programme. Being part of a national network of Alliances was invaluable to the Alliance experts by experiences, and to GFO as Alliance convenor.



The Alliance experts by experiences benefitted from the networking opportunities of attending national Food Power conferences and training courses, as well as travelling around the country to see first-hand the work of other experts by experience. The opportunity, a first for most, to see for themselves what was happening in other parts of the country, brought multiple benefits. For some, it helped them to see that rather than being an individual problem, for which they often shoulder the blame, food poverty is a widespread and systemic problem with deep roots in our existing economic models. It also helped them to recognise their work as a part of a much bigger national movement to end food poverty. This, in turn, made it easier for them to speak out about their experience of food poverty without shame, and to recognise the importance of telling their stories as a way of contributing to solutions and ensuring that others should not have to endure food poverty in the same way they have. The experience of participating in national networking meetings also helped them to develop the confidence to speak in large public forums. Some have

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forged long-term friendships with experts by experience in other parts of the country and have started to support each other's efforts.

GFO staff also benefitted from being part of a national network of Alliances. Food Power offered a programme of conferences, webinars, case study learning, and informal networking opportunities centred around issues of food poverty, including how to set up and manage an Alliance, work with experts by experiences, run campaigns and speak to the media, and evaluate their work. These opportunities ensured that good practice and learning were shared quickly across the network. They also generated informal links across Alliance convenors, allowing them to reach out to each other for information and support when they needed it.

The networking across community food services and district councils afforded by the establishment of the CFNs has brought benefits to both groups. For the community food services, the regular meetings provide a ready-made forum for them to share good practice and learning about how to respond to the unprecedented conditions created by COVID-19, while also supporting each other emotionally through personally-demanding circumstances. The meetings also provide a mechanism to move resources around to where they are most needed quickly and efficiently, including surplus food and household goods, as well as means of transport. By serving these purposes, the Networks enable a more effective response under the extreme pressure to respond quickly created by COVID-19, ensuring that assistance reaches those that need it.

For the district and city councils, participating in Network meetings has helped them to understand the landscape of community food provision in their territories and tap into local knowledge about what is needed where, which has informed the way they allocate resources to assist service providers to meet needs.

The Power of Stories

“Until you hear it from people’s mouths, it’s very abstract. Telling stories is always very powerful, ... as opposed to just seeing the numbers.”
(Alliance member – service provider)

Story-telling became a powerful medium by which the Alliance helped to raise the voices of people with lived experience and convey messages to key audiences. It occurred in many ways and at many levels.



For the experts by experience on the Alliance, the process of developing, rehearsing and telling their own stories turned out to be empowering in itself. Using different creative mediums – including journaling, photos, and film – to surface key themes and weave them into a broader narrative helped them to understand the dynamics underlying their personal circumstances, and to contextualise their experiences within wider systemic issues.

For some professionals, this was the most useful aspect of sitting on the Alliance. They found that listening to stories ‘from the mouths’ of people with lived experience during Alliance meetings brought to life the dynamics of food poverty, and the realities of living in poverty in Oxford, much more than reading research or statistics ever could. It also helped to put a human face on the experience of food poverty. This, in turn, helped them to adapt their services to better meet local needs in a way that dignifies the lives of the people they are serving. Service providers attending CFN meetings have similarly found that stories from their service users can be an effective way to illustrate best practice.

GFO staff found that the compelling stories that emerged from Alliance members were often the most effective medium for helping local decision-makers move beyond the awareness that food poverty exists in Oxfordshire, to understand how and why food poverty manifests in Oxfordshire, one of the most affluent counties in England. Understanding the local dynamics is key to decision-

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makers identifying and supporting the best approaches to address the problem and decide where to allocate resources. Most notably, the Oxfordshire Living Wage campaign organised by GFO drew on stories and images (video and photos) from the Alliance. The campaign contributed to a unanimous vote among Oxfordshire County Councillors, in September 2019, to assess the need for a Living Wage in Oxfordshire.

The Alliance's story-telling culminated in the depiction of a compelling story to raise public awareness of the existence of food poverty in Oxford. On the 2019 End Hunger UK National Day of Action, Alliance members came together in the centre of Oxford city to portray the scene of an invisible feast, highlighting the hidden hunger faced by many individuals and families in Oxfordshire. The event was supported by the local authorities and covered by local broadcast media.

Similarly, the CFNs are starting to recognise that they have a compelling story to tell about the power of collective action to meet community needs efficiently and effectively. They are starting to discuss how their story can be used as a lever to advocate for the creation of robust and sustainable local infrastructure to prevent food poverty in the future, and to mitigate the effects of food poverty when it arises.

Balancing Immediate Support with Attention to Structural Issues

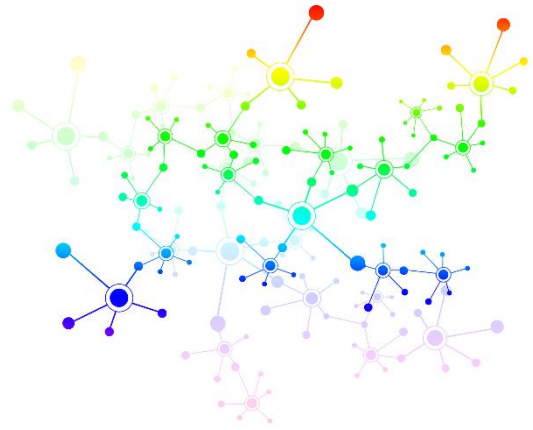
“The forecast is that the next pandemic will be even bigger. This is just a test run... helping us to establish the infrastructure for the long term.”

(CFN member – service provider)

The CFNs were set up to facilitate communications and coordination across the numerous community food services dealing with the COVID-19 crisis across Oxfordshire. They have allowed services to share information and resources quickly and efficiently, thereby meeting the needs of people who have struggled to access food during the COVID-19 crisis.

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After six months of operation, a healthy debate is emerging about the role of the Networks and the kinds of services offered by Network members. Is it enough to ensure good coordination across services? Or should the Networks also be involved in advocating for long-term structural change? Are the services currently provided appropriate? Some members are concerned that the services they provide – mostly



food banks and community fridges and larders which redistribute surplus food – may perpetuate a system of handouts and promote a culture of dependency, while others do not believe that food services should act as gatekeepers to people’s fundamental right to food. Some are concerned that services based on food surplus perpetuate supply chain waste and a perception that people in need are not deserving of good quality food, but simply what is left from a wasteful system. Others are not concerned about this issue. Some are keen to put their energy into efforts to address the structural causes of food poverty and advocate for long-term and sustainable change to systems which promote resilience, autonomy and choice for everyone – including approaches such as universal basic income.

These are difficult questions to resolve when the current pandemic demands so much time and energy just to meet the huge, immediate demand for services. In some ways, the massive effort going into providing immediate support is a testing ground for what needs to be in place in the long-term. As one Network member has pointed out, there are bigger crises coming – other pandemics, climate change – and the need for local infrastructure for food provision will be greater than ever. The response to COVID-19 has been a test run for what works. The work at hand now is perhaps to build a healthy ecosystem of diverse kinds of services which can meet the different needs of different people at different times. That may include free provision through food banks and fridges for those who are so hard hit they do not have the resources to pay for services, as well as paid services such as larders, and other initiatives which help people to acquire the knowledge and skills to be resilient in normal times and in the face of future crises.

The local councils (district, city and county) have a role to play in supporting and resourcing a permanent local infrastructure. Their engagement in the Networks ensures that they have access to the emergent understanding of what this infrastructure should look like. Equally, Network

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members could be engaged in other decision-making forums, to ensure that their understanding of conditions on the ground feeds into decisions about resource allocation and support services. GFO also has a requirement to continue to play an active role by supporting campaigns locally and nationally, and providing local evidence to inform other organisations which lobby central government.

What have we learned and how can it inform future initiatives?

The Alliance was a key actor in a critical moment in the food poverty sector in Oxford. It represented the beginning of a collective movement to recognise and address food poverty in the city, understand what was already happening, and elevate the voices of those with lived experience of food poverty. It lay



the foundations for an effective and fast response to the deeper crisis of food poverty across the county triggered by COVID-19. The experience and learning from working with the Alliance meant GFO was ideally placed to convene district networks to coordinate action across a huge number of community food services in response to the crisis. The work of the Alliance also helped to move food poverty up the policy agenda, with the city and district councils now actively collaborating with community food services.

What we learned in this process may help to inform future initiatives:

- ✓ Collective action involves bringing disparate actors to the table in order to foster dialogue and generate ideas based on diverse perspectives and experiences. Maintaining interest and engagement requires skilled navigation of diverse needs, priorities and ways of working, including convenient meeting times, communication methods, and expectations around the pace of work.
- ✓ Individuals willing to engage in collective action tend to be highly-motivated and engaged, and therefore busy. Keeping them involved may require adapting methodologies to fit in with

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their schedules, and using multiple communication methods to ensure that information flows among them.

- ✓ Moving beyond lip service to engage experts by experience in collective action in a meaningful way can place a burden on individuals who may already be juggling many demands on their time. It is important to look for ways to ease the burden and to ensure that the benefits to them justify the personal costs. How this is done needs to be tailored to the needs of each individual.
- ✓ Bringing the voices of lived experience into collaborative forums helps to ensure that services respect and dignify service users. The time and energy required to ensure that experts by experience can contribute in whatever way they wish needs to be taken into account when planning and allocating resources for such collaborations. It may also be important to 'unlearn' usual ways of working to create the conditions for experts by experience to contribute.
- ✓ Time spent networking is a worthwhile investment. It can provide multiple benefits for individuals involved in collective action – from access to knowledge, information and resources, to the practical and emotional support that help to bolster personal resilience and motivation.
- ✓ Story-telling can be a powerful pathway to change. It can help both the story-teller and the listener to understand the complex dynamics of poverty which are not easily communicated through written research and statistics. Various creative mediums can be used to create and tell these stories.
- ✓ COVID-19 may be just one of many crises which undermine people's ability to afford healthy food. We need to ensure that local infrastructure is in place to respond to crises as they arise. This is likely to require a diverse set of services which can meet the different needs of different people at different times. 'Building back better' after COVID-19 should include the systems changes needed to promote resilience, autonomy and choice for all.