

Access to healthy, nutritious and affordable food:

Engagement findings

February 2026



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1. Background

1. As part of the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into 'Access to healthy, nutritious and affordable food', the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement with food projects across Wales.
2. Engagement comprised a combination of informal discussion with staff, volunteers, and individuals accessing the food projects, alongside observational methods. Across the different projects, varying terminology was used to describe those accessing services. For consistency, this paper refers to these individuals as *service users*.
3. Due to the transient and sensitive nature of the projects, particularly the food pantry element, some discussions were ad hoc and less formal than a structured focus group or interview.
4. This paper is based upon contributions made following visits to four food projects:
 - Llantwit Major Food Project
 - Porthi'r Dre, Caernarfon
 - Yr Orsaf, Penygroes
 - Y Dref Werdd, Blaenau Ffestiniog
5. The following themes emerged from discussions, along with direct observation of the project's operations.

2. Engagement findings

Stigma

6. Staff and volunteers across the projects consistently reported that stigma remains a significant barrier for individuals who, in principle, would benefit from accessing one or more initiatives run by food projects. Whilst the nature of initiatives varied across projects, stigma and its associated challenges, was the foremost issue raised during discussions.

7. Contributors shared anecdotal accounts illustrating the various ways in which stigma can dissuade people from accessing the support they need. One contributor noted that some customers are so reluctant to be seen attending a project that they have requested home deliveries instead.

“There’s a stigma around going to a food bank and things like that. . . There’s a stigma around people who are desperate, because we’ve had some recently - they make excuses so they can get deliveries because they don’t want to be seen. But they’ve started coming into the office now, so they’re getting help with electricity and all sorts of things afterwards, because we’ve got electricity vouchers and things like that as well. So we’re able to help with a lot more things.”

8. Projects have implemented various strategies to reduce stigma associated with accessing support. These include:-

- Developing a ‘one-stop shop’ model, whereby customers can access food alongside other forms of support, such as debt and benefit advice and electricity vouchers.
- Collecting minimal, or no, personal data from customers. This included deliberately refraining from asking customers about their financial circumstances in order to ensure the service remains as non-intrusive and non-judgmental as possible.
- Introducing a nominal membership fee, which varied between £3 - £5 across projects. This approach is intended to foster a sense of contribution rather than reliance on a hand-out, thereby supporting customers’ dignity and morale. The income generated is subsequently used to replenish food pantry stock.

“It’s a shift in mindset and how they think about the service.”

9. Adapting the language used to describe and promote the project was key. This often involved nuanced and subtle changes. For example, some staff explained that some individuals will refer to the food pantry as a food bank, which has negative connotations for many. Attempts are made to use inclusive language by explaining the pantry has multiple roles, including reducing food waste.

10. One project will occasionally place suitable food items on tables outside the building in which the project operates, as this allows people to access the items in a transient way without engaging with staff. Staff explained that food made available in this way is usually taken very quickly.

Perception

11. Discussion on the stigma associated with food poverty led to broader conversation about the issues surrounding access to healthy, nutritious, and affordable food.

12. Persistent perceptions remain that locally produced food is too expensive and primarily accessible to middle class consumers. Several contributors highlighted that some individuals experiencing food poverty internalise these assumptions, leading to feelings that they do not deserve access to local or organic produce.

“Something that is a barrier and part of the national pattern is that local vegetables are seen as expensive.”

Reasons for accessing food projects

13. Staff and/or volunteers from all projects explained that their customer base is diverse with people accessing different initiatives within the project, such as pantries or allotments for one or more reasons. The most common reasons cited were:-

- Experiences of food poverty;
- Opposition to food waste;
- Addressing feelings of social isolation.

14. Although most projects held limited data, reflecting a deliberate commitment to minimising the collection of personal data, staff and volunteers generally perceived that the majority of customers experienced some form of financial hardship.

15. Social isolation emerged as a key theme, reflecting the nuanced nature of food poverty and the recognition that it cannot be considered in isolation but is closely entwined with other challenges.

16. One staff member described how, during the project's initial phase, the pantry operated from an alternative location where customers would arrive early to queue and engage in conversation. Whilst staff initially assumed that reducing the queue would be welcomed, it became clear that customers valued the opportunity for social interaction, with some arriving early specifically to socialise.

17. However, concerns remained that the visibility of the queue could reinforce stigma. In response, the project sought to balance the clear want for social interaction with preserving the dignity of customers. Consequently, customers now enter through the front door, pay a nominal fee in exchange for a ticket, and wait indoors, where they can socialise in a more discreet environment.

Variety of food

18. Staff involved in the projects explained that the food available can often be unpredictable, with one describing it as "random." This can make it challenging for people to prepare meals, particularly for those with limited cooking skills and/or cooking equipment.

19. One project highlighted challenges associated with surplus food received from a local supermarket. The type of surplus food available was not always appropriate in the local context. For example, the project operates in an area that is typically cold and wet, yet supermarket stock is determined centrally, based on consumer demand in London. As a result, surplus items often include salads and soft fruits, such as strawberries, which are less appealing to the needs and preferences of those accessing the project locally.

"In addition, food ordering is not controlled by Co-op Blaenau but by Co-op London. As a result, when the weather is cold and wet in Blaenau but hot in London, we receive large quantities of strawberries and salads. This has been raised with the Co-op previously, but we were told nothing can be done as local stores do not place the orders. This is a policy issue that needs addressing, as it would help to reduce waste."

20. One challenge with those engaged with the FareShare model is the nutritional value of the food. Often the food is unhealthy with one staff member describing it as "junk food."

Partnerships

21. Several staff members and volunteers were keen to emphasise that food poverty cannot be addressed in isolation, as it is closely linked to a range of other social and economic factors.

22. As a result, food projects often work in partnership with other service providers to address underlying issues affecting individuals' financial wellbeing. This was referred to as a "one stop shop" for support by some contributors.

"Citizens Advice comes every fortnight, so they run a drop-in. They're full all the time."

23. For example, several projects reported that representatives from organisations like Citizens Advice and Warm Wales attend on specific days to provide support with debt, energy and benefits. One project described these drop-in sessions as often being at full capacity.

"What's unique in Blaenau is a kind of community approach - bringing everyone together every six weeks: Seren, GISDA and others."

Education

24. When discussing possible solutions to some of the issues identified, education emerged as a recurring theme throughout the discussions.

25. Contributors emphasised the importance of prioritising education focused on cooking and nutrition within schools as a way of encouraging future generations to develop food skills.

26. A core objective of the projects is to support customers to acquire or develop their food skills and take greater responsibility for their food choices. This was frequently framed as an approach to enhancing independence rather than encouraging dependency.

27. At the project level, staff routinely provide practical guidance when assembling food bags, offering suggestions for meal ideas and ingredient combinations. This was an aspect of the engagement that was observed by the Citizen Engagement Team.

28. In addition, the use of online cooking tutorials was highlighted as a way of empowering customers to prepare nutritious meals with greater confidence. For example, one project explained that they intend on placing a screen with a video tutorial in their reception area. Some projects also delivered cooking classes themselves or signposted customers to courses offered by local colleges.

29. Other strategies included the provision of recipe cards with nutritional information, enabling customers to understand how to prepare balanced meals using the ingredients available to them.

Demographics

30. According to staff and volunteers, there is no single demographic group that stands out among those accessing the project. One project, for example, described working with individuals aged between 16 and 90, including single people as well as families.

31. It is important to note that, due to the projects' commitment to minimising the collection of personal data, this observation cannot be stated with certainty and is based on the perceptions of staff and volunteers rather than on data collection.

Fluctuation in engagement with projects

32. Several contributors noted that while demand for their services is relatively high throughout the year, with the lead up to Christmas being particularly busy, it tends to decrease during the summer months.

33. This pattern has been observed consistently over successive years and was described as surprising by some staff, who had anticipated increased demand during school holidays.

"It's strange - in the summer we're not busy, and that's a pattern, and we don't understand why."