



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

Taking a 'more than food' approach.



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

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FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING INTRODUCTION

The need for safe, comfortable, warm, and welcoming food services is a perennial focus of faith and community-based organisations. Being of service to those experiencing homelessness has also been a key facet of faith and community-based work historically, and this vital work continues today.

Currently, in the UK, according to recent research, almost a third of the population report either being actively hungry, struggling to afford the foods they need and enjoy, or describe themselves as worried about feeding themselves and their families.

The term ‘food insecurity’ describes the challenges people have in accessing food, which is affordable, available, accessible, and appropriate. Food and fuel prices are increasing in the UK, and the recent reduction in welfare benefits means that many people cut their food budgets down in order to pay for other expenses. Many people manage chronic health conditions and food allergies and intolerances, which makes meal preparation time consuming and often expensive. There are also rising numbers of people in the UK who may just about be able to afford food but who are lonely, isolated and suffer from poor mental and emotional health.

“Those who eat socially more often feel happier and are more satisfied with life, are more trusting of others, are more engaged with their local communities, and have more friends they can depend on for support.”

Robin Dunbar, Oxford University, 2017.

Taken together, these social conditions mean that currently, food insecurity in its broadest sense- both physical hunger and the hunger for company- is on the rise. For all of these different people, challenges around food sharing and eating together are also a common theme. Although eating with others may seem relatively trivial compared with experiencing hunger, the capacity to share food and enjoy meals are important factors tied up with experiences of homelessness. When relationships unravel, and people become disconnected from friends and family when people become unemployed, suffer trauma, arrive as refugees in this country or leave care, for example, people’s capacity to engage in eating activities with others is also affected.

“This is beyond just a material problem. It’s to do with trust, building up a relationship where people are willing to take that step to come indoors”

Jon Kuhrt, Rough Sleeping Advisor at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING INTRODUCTION

The Pandemic highlighted not just the importance of food but the social connections that also keep us safe and well. Faith and community-based groups swung into action during this time and formed a crucial part of the national response. Embedded into communities, with infrastructure such as kitchens, and with wide networks of contacts, these groups delivered safe and effective food support that came with a side order of conversation and connection. However, Covid restrictions meant that many faith and community-based organisations limited their indoor eating activities or had to shield their own volunteers, which restricted their capacity.

Now that time of Pandemic and crisis is shifting back to normality, we need to reflect on learnings from this time and think through how faith and community-based food services can continue to support people already experiencing homelessness through meal provision, as well as responding to the rising numbers of those at risk of homelessness who may also be seeking help. Homelessness is more complex than many people assume. The commonplace idea of a man on the street, rough sleeping, is only one facet of a complicated picture of those experiencing homelessness. Half of all homeless people are women, many come from ethnic minorities, and most people are not rough sleepers, but they are still homeless. Homelessness is not fixed; it is not just about resources, and it cannot be solved only through the provision of housing.

Fundamentally, eating together and with others not only provides the physical sustenance we need to survive but it also tethers people to a shared reality when their day-to-day life can be chaotic and haphazard. Sitting and eating a nutritious hot meal and having time to digest food in relaxed, warm, and comfortable setting is something everyone cherishes. For people experiencing homelessness, this need is even greater.

Social meals enable social relationships to develop over a conversation, and they are an ideal setting to get to know people and to signpost users to other services. Mealtimes can also be the place where other wraparound services are offered in a more holistic way, helping to prevent and address the reasons why people are experiencing homelessness.

So, within this guide, we frame eating together as much being about ‘more than food’; as a common thread that binds people together and which prevents them from falling into isolation and extremes of impoverishment. We also frame ‘social eating’ services as maintaining access to a thread that can enable people to trace their way back to wellbeing.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

OVERVIEW OF THE GUIDE

This guide provides a stepping-stone guide to setting up what we call a ‘social eating’ service through adopting a ‘more than food’ approach. The approach emphasises the need to eat together in keeping people tethered to society. ‘Social eating’ can be a stepping-stone for recipients towards better physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health. This guide is set within a ‘more than food’ framework which emphasises how eating together is about much more than nutrition and physical sustenance and how much more than satiating hunger can be accomplished when we add additional ‘social eating’ models to the conventional street and outreach food ones.

The ‘more than food’ approach also emphasises how linking social eating services together with other stakeholders can create benefits for those experiencing homelessness and for the faith and community-based groups that serve them.

By considering the needs of service-users, Local Authorities, faith and community-based groups, and the broader charitable sector, the ‘more than food’ approach shows why providing food alone should only be one part of the vital work that faith and community-based organisations undertake. By promoting a ‘more than food’ approach, we aim to support your organisation to enrich and extend the work you do by providing a framework of evidence-based best practice.

In this guide, we begin with an overview of the importance of group eating activities, or commensality as it is known in academic parlance. We offer some evidence-based insights into why experiences of homelessness can be exacerbated when people are also excluded from opportunities to eat together. Then the guide breaks down the benefits and limitations of the conventional model of ‘street-feeding’ in order to show where a ‘more than food’ approach fits with this type of food-service provision.

Then a practical guide to setting up and joining up ‘social eating’ services is provided. All of the suggestions and advice provided in this guide come from the latest research, and at the end of the guide, there are suggestions for further reading; we showcase some exemplar organisations that are already using a ‘more than food’ approach, and the academic work we have discussed is credited.



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

THE IMPORTANCE OF ‘SOCIAL EATING’

“Back in 2017 we launched our social eating event, Bestop Kitchen, in response to a growing sense of isolation & loneliness many were feeling in our community. Social eating spaces create a safe space where people connect with others, form community & new friendships and share in great food together.”

Chris Easton, Community Minister, Bestwood Park Church, Nottingham.

Eating in groups is one of the most important activities that humans undertake. And although eating a meal together can seem like a very ordinary and everyday occurrence, in fact, commensality is an important way in which our social world is held together. Faith groups have long known that sharing food is a way of bringing people together and a means of welcoming people into places and spaces. It is also a way of showing and receiving care. The upholding of hospitality is a core part of the work that faith and community-based groups do and eating together helps put belief into action. Eating together feeds both body, mind, and spirit.



However, for people experiencing homelessness, the ability to engage in commensality is often severely limited. Being able to reciprocate with meals, the pleasures of cooking for oneself or for others, and the experiences of communion, conviviality and sociality are all curtailed when people do not have regular access to food or to cooking and eating facilities. Precarious, traumatic, and dysfunctional relationships or a lack of relationships in general also severely impact upon the capacity for people to engage in commensality.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

THE IMPORTANCE OF ‘SOCIAL EATING’

Yet, we know from research that people who eat together regularly report feeling happier, more satisfied with life, and enjoy a sense of purpose and belonging. People who regularly engage in eating together activities also feel better connected to their communities and state that they have people they can turn to in times of trouble. So even at a surface level, we can see that the impacts of commensality extend far beyond physical nutrition. Eating together connects individuals to each other, to their communities, and to the broader social world.

Commensality is a bridge back into the social world, and even if temporary and limited in nature, eating together is still of immense value to people experiencing homelessness and should be encouraged and enabled wherever possible.

When thinking through the value of offering winter food services and food services more generally, faith and community-based organisations are asked to consider the ‘ingredients of homelessness’ and how these impact a person’s ability to contribute to, and participate in, commensality.



Each one of these spheres represents a complicated area of a person’s life, and when one area is a challenge, the others are always impacted. When we think about where commensality comes into this picture, we can see that having the resources, capacity, opportunity, and encouragement to eat together can have impacts across a person’s life. When people are excluded from eating together activities, it negatively affects their identity, sense of self, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Being in poverty and unhoused is traumatic, isolating, stigmatising, and some people move in and out of being housed within the course of their lives. Having access to social eating services can enable people to gain access to available resources, establish and maintain connections, and meet in informal ways that help them to feel less like a problem and more like a participant.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

THE IMPORTANCE OF ‘SOCIAL EATING’

“If housing isn’t the solution to homelessness, I’m pretty certain community is”
Phil Conn, Oasis Community Housing.

Faith and community-based groups who provide ‘more than food’ services are trying to support and nourish each one of these areas of a person’s life. Even in temporary and partial ways, the moments of commensality created in social eating spaces can provide benefits. These meal-centred services support people experiencing homelessness to remain connected to wider society.

Social eating projects involve serving a seated meal, usually with more than one course and usually at a mealtime, to promote the social side of eating. Food is a reason for people to gather together and a two or three-course meal is a reason to linger and mingle. These services offer a limited menu but place emphasis on the food being fresh and homemade.

The social eating model is designed to promote a service where customers or service-users feel welcome, comfortable and can get some respite from their challenging everyday life. Social eating mealtimes are staged to encourage people to sit and eat in their own time, with others, so they can experience the benefits of domestic or community commensality, which are usually missing in their day to day lives. Social eating services provide people with vital health, wellbeing, and social benefits, which are also called ‘socio-cultural capital’ in academic terms. High levels of this type of social capital are one of the main factors which determine how long and how well we live.

Later in this guide, we will go on to discuss a ‘more than food’ approach and expand upon some of the benefits of social eating that we have identified here. Then the guide provides a walk-through guide to an ideal social eating service, pausing at each stage of the activity to reflect and make some practical suggestions.

In the next section of the guide, we discuss the benefits and the challenges around one of the most common forms of food support- ‘street-feeding’ or street-based food services.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING CURRENT MODELS – STREET-BASED FOOD SERVICES

By drawing together current research findings, this section of the guide seeks to reflect on the benefits and limitations of street-based provision. We offer evidence-based, constructive criticisms to those groups who might be thinking beyond street-based feeding towards a ‘more than food’ approach.

Whilst ‘street-feeding’ and food outreach services are one of the most commonly used and well-known approaches to engaging with and providing food for those experiencing homelessness, these services are also used by people temporarily housed in hostels, those at risk of homelessness, as well as people that are food insecure, for example. The work that these academics have undertaken takes into consideration these various different views, opinions, and perspectives with an overall focus on service-user experiences.

Research by various academics and practitioners have focused on understanding the benefits and challenges associated with street-feeding outreach from the perspectives of those experiencing homelessness and those that work to support them. Some researchers have looked at food memories and emotions, some have looked at the links between mental health, diet and homelessness, and others have focused on how food can act as a bridge between different faith organisations and the people they serve.

These findings will lead us into a further discussion of how a ‘more than food’ approach can be of benefit to recipients.

This guide is not designed to be an either/or choice. It is not intended to problematise or minimise the challenges groups, and Local Authorities have in effectively dealing with a complex and sensitive issue. It is intended to sensitively raise questions about the most common and proliferating form of food provision. If groups are to be as effective as possible and each fulfil their differing service missions, listening and accepting suggestions from recipients about what they want and need is vital.

Across the research studies we reviewed, three key themes arose with street-feeding. These three overarching themes are discussed below, diagrams show how each of these issues plays out for recipients, and we also note the ‘more than food’ suggestions that service-user themselves have requested.

This sets the stage for thinking through what other approaches faith and community-based groups can deploy, and for the following section of the guide, which is a step-by-step walk-through of an ideal social eating project. This part of the guide will show your organisation where each of these themes has been incorporated into a ‘more than food’ or ‘social eating’ project. The first of the three main themes identified by researchers is the feeling of being ‘grateful yet resigned’.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING GRATEFUL YET RESIGNED

Amongst people being fed outside, there is a reluctance to criticise faith and community-based organisations, and most recipients express gratitude and appreciation for the food provided and for the non-judgemental attitudes of staff.

Overall, recipients of street-feeding projects can be described as ‘grateful yet resigned’ and whilst they are appreciative of ‘any’ food they receive, they are also resigned to receiving poor quality and monotonous food and to a lack of choice. Most interviewees described street-feeding as providing basic, low-quality food to satiate immediate hunger. They described the food as being easy to serve or eat, as uncomplicated, and as generally filling. Respondents described having more than enough food provision, albeit without much choice or quality.

Hostel dwellers with access to centralised food services spoke of precooked meals, repetition, recycling of leftovers, limited choice, and inability to accommodate their individual preferences. Food quality in short-term residential accommodation was also viewed dubiously. Respondents also wanted improved mealtimes and appropriate temperature meals, including hot evening meals. Many people have experiences of childhood poverty which limited their capacity to try new foods. The risks associated with illness or intolerances when unhoused were seen as limitations to extending food repertoires, and so the opportunity to taste and try small helpings of food that they could control was seen as desirable.

Respondents acknowledge that personal food preferences and dietary requirements are difficult to accommodate. Many people described having some access to fresh fruit and vegetables, but increased access is desired. Respondents reflect that unhealthy packaged foods included in parcels, such as crisps or sugary foods, help them to ‘feel good’ temporarily, and provide comfort during difficult times. However, they recommended expanding food variety to allow people to choose the food they want to eat, particularly for those trying to manage chronic health conditions. Many interviewees were managing dental problems and requested easy to chew and swallow foods that weren’t too sugary.



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

GRATEFUL YET RESIGNED

Just like the general population, people experiencing homelessness wanted food they enjoyed that was at least not going to worsen health, and they care about eating fresh, healthy food and hot, nutritious meals. Eating whilst standing up, often hurriedly, was also seen as a negative aspect of street-feeding, and respondents expressed the wish to relax after meals and to be able to digest food properly. Difficulties in washing hands, wiping mouths after food, keeping clean and hygienic were also mentioned, and places, spaces and projects that could offer indoor eating with washing facilities were seen as desirable.

Suggestions were made to change the eating experience and types of food on offer, with a preference, expressed for whole meals rather than snacks. Specifically, to include better dinners with more variety and more fresh fruit, vegetables, and good quality meat, and less sugary, treaty chocolatey foods or junk food. People also asked for wraparound support to assist chronic disease management, such as diabetes and dentistry services.

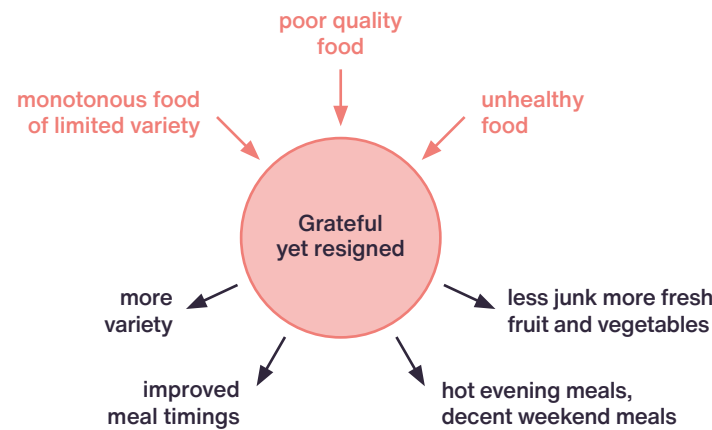


Diagram modified from 'Gratitude, resignation, and the desire for dignity: lived experience of food charity recipients and their recommendations for improvement' (Booth et al., 2018).

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

ERODED DIGNITY

Food queues are spoken about extensively and are seen as necessary but also as frustrating, undignified and highly visible ways of receiving food.

Dignity is eroded as a result of being fed without choice, and queuing for food in public places can create a potentially threatening environment. Jostling for queue position was a recognised conflict trigger. Fear of missing out on food was exacerbated by long queues. Fights erupt because of queue jumping. Some reported being the victim of or witnessing violence or being intimidated and avoiding certain services to ensure personal safety. Long-term recipients express concerns about shifts in the queue demographics, describing refugees and pensioners as easily spotted newcomers. Newcomers were a source of friction, fuelling the perception that regulars might miss out on food.

Long queues meant long waits, especially undesirable in extreme weather. Standing in the wet, wind and cold was regularly mentioned, with people having to choose between eating and staying dry or queuing only to find items had run out, or food had gone cold. Respondents also expressed concern about those serving being out in poor weather and the work required by groups to keep food hot outdoors.

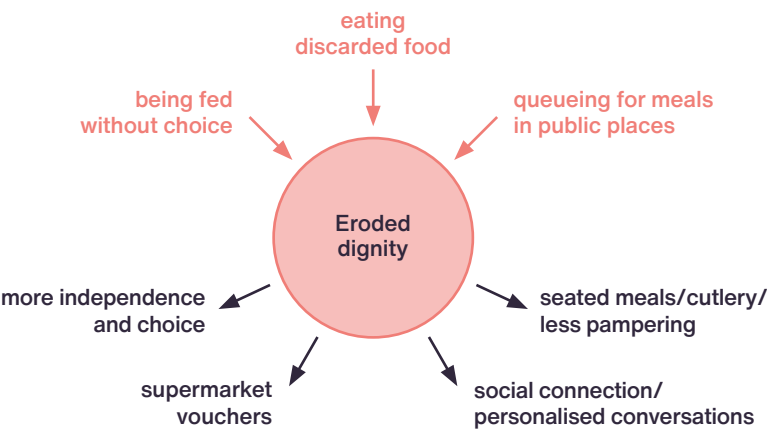


Diagram modified from 'Gratitude, resignation, and the desire for dignity: lived experience of food charity recipients and their recommendations for improvement' (Booth et al., 2018).

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING ERODED DIGNITY

Respondents want less also ‘pampering’ and more opportunities to demonstrate their independence. Many people had cooking skills and wanted places where they could contribute something rather than just receive food. Many respondents requested access to supermarket vouchers so they could manage some of their own food budgets, buy specialist dietarily appropriate foods and food that they could store and consume at a later date in hostel rooms, for example. Some respondents wanted to gain experience and basic qualifications as routes back into future work. Groups who offered social connections and tried to get to know recipients were praised.

Many people accessing food support may not be currently homeless, but they may be in accommodation that is precarious or have domestic situations that are unpleasant. Respondents had experienced being homeless and were still struggling to maintain a domestic routine in new accommodation; many were lonely, isolated and in poverty and therefore maintaining links to food outreach services was seen as beneficial.

A personalised connection with service providers was desired rather than just being fed in a queue. More reliable and inviting places to eat, with plates, cutlery, and the chance to sit down were also recommended.

Many people had cooking skills and wanted places where they could contribute something rather than just receive food



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING FOND MEMORIES OF FOOD AND A DESIRE FOR INCLUSION

The theme of ‘food memories and inclusion’ reflected a desire for commensality and reinstating food as a shared social activity. Respondents readily reflected on the deeper meaning of food and recounted memories of nostalgic eating occasions. Favourite foods, special mealtime occasions, the routine and ritual of mealtimes were all things spoken about by respondents. Eating together is seen as part of daily life, and this was something that people really missed. Services that enabled recipients to sit somewhere warm, indoors, where they were able to eat in a relaxed manner, and engage with service providers, was something welcomed by respondents.

Respondents were keen to participate in normal, societal eating. The importance of a ‘proper dinner’, ‘an evening meal’, and a ‘decent Sunday meal’ was discussed. Respondents felt faith and community-based groups did not want them to miss out on celebratory foods such as Easter eggs or Christmas fare, and they know that donations of these foods peaked at these times, but they also felt that eating together should be part of a weekly routine rather than following faith and community-based celebrations.

Respondents wanted normalised or culturally appropriate eating occasions such as Sunday dinners. Roast dinners were a rare luxury and in stark contrast to their current fare, namely, soup served in disposable cups, meat pies, sandwiches or meals eaten from plastic containers while standing in the park.

Hot dinners, eaten at a table with others, were seen as homely and offering comfort as well as opportunities for socialisation and commensality.

“No one says ‘my life was changed when I walked into a church and people gave me a bag of free stuff’”

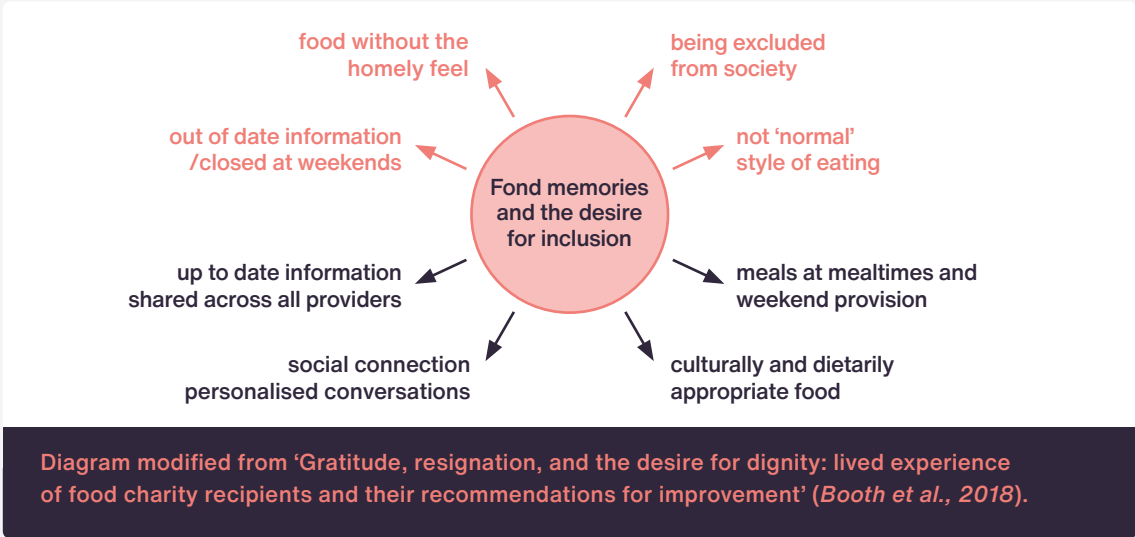
Jon Kuhrt, Rough Sleeping Advisor at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Groups that simply turn up with food, often after announcements on social media, but without carefully considering what other services are available and which days and times are already covered, can be confusing and disruptive for recipients. Regular times and days, with a weekly schedule, accessible by text or which could be photographed on a phone and shared was requested so people can easily see what spread of services there are across any given week.

People were concerned about the proliferation of pop-up groups that appeared but then disappeared. People sometimes felt obligated to have their photo taken when receiving food and felt it was rude to refuse if asked. However, the need for privacy and dignity was also paramount in people’s answers, given some people may be concealing the extent of their vulnerability to their social networks. Refrain from making food services seem conditional on engaging with an organisations social media output.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING
FOND MEMORIES OF FOOD AND A DESIRE FOR INCLUSION

Weekday evening food provision was common, as were Christmas meals, for example; however, weekends were times when respondents often reported gaps. Respondents requested more communication between different organisations so that services are not duplicated and gaps are addressed, where possible.



Specialist support services for care-leavers, ex-offenders, ex-armed forces, victims of domestic violence and refugees were identified as being helpful to respondents. The specific types of experience, as well as the statutory regulations that govern the services that Local Authorities must provide, create the need for well-informed outreach services, and partnership working.

Work undertaken by some researchers describes the power of food to build bridges between individuals and support networks, and their findings show how engaging in meal-centred activities can act as a 'lifestyle motivator'. This research shows that people experience benefits to their health, their self-esteem, and social skills and confidence when they are involved with, contribute to, and participate in, commensality. Food in these settings is meaningful and stirs up memories and emotions, which can act as pathways towards reconnecting people with their own spirits, desires, and ambitions, as well as giving them something to look forward to and feel hopeful about.

However, one of the central findings that emerge under this theme is people's desire to gain pleasure from eating. Instrumental food provision was seen as necessary but often lacking the warmth that people craved when their lives were so challenging. People saw eating together at a table as a form of caring and as spaces and places where they might also choose to show care in informal ways. Helping out, clearing down spaces, washing up- these are all mentioned as small links back to 'normal' life when many people experience homelessness not just as being unhoused but as being excluded and isolated, and where they are often passed over and passed by.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING
SUMMARY OF STREET-FEEDING AND FOOD
OUTREACH SERVICES

The desire to ensure people are fed and have access to contacts and services whilst they are experiencing homelessness means street feeding and food outreach services have long been a part of the repertoire of services that faith and community-based organisations offer. As stated, this guide is not intended to demote this valuable first point of contact work, but it is designed to support groups to think through the implications of only offering stand-alone food support. This is especially true of groups that are not well-networked in or are unaware of what other services are being offered in their area.

This type of provision put within a context of a 'more than food' approach is viewed as a stepping-stone to other services, groups, and partners who, when working in tandem, can create much better outcomes for the people they want to serve.

Offering food in the winter months is often logistically difficult, time-consuming and resource-heavy for groups, and if care is not taken, the best-intended efforts may inadvertently antagonise other groups and Local Authorities. Just as faith and community-based groups seek to promote peace and the meeting of minds and spirits in service of a higher power, the value of collective approaches is also to seek harmony not just between faith and community-based groups and the people they serve but between all other stakeholders.

The saying goes that a problem shared is a problem halved. This ethos of cooperation and partnership can make the challenges of running meal services less onerous and ensure that the hard work of groups is effective. With a problem as socially significant, challenging, long-standing, and deep-rooted, no one group alone can solve the crisis of homelessness, but great work can be achieved in the spirit of cooperation.

In order to better understand the 'more than food' approach, the guide will now walk readers through an ideal 'more than food' based service, alighting on the key steps or stages of the mealtime and reflecting on each of them.

At the end of this walk-through, we will provide details of some exemplar 'more than food' projects and organisations and some links to further information that includes affordable food suppliers such as FareShare.



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

THE INGREDIENTS OF A ‘MORE THAN FOOD’ APPROACH TO SOCIAL EATING SERVICES

“Churches bring people into places not just of transaction, but of community”

Jon Kuhrt, Rough Sleeping Advisor at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Whilst we recognise that not all faith and community-based organisations have ready access to venues that are available when service-users need them, or within walking distance, or on public transport routes, this next section is aimed at those wanting to adopt a ‘more than food’ approach by utilising their venues.

However, even if groups are not able to offer indoor meal services, a ‘more than food’ approach asks us to consider when, where and why we offer food outreach services. At every stage of project development and implementation, a ‘more than food’ approach directs us to think about feeding the whole person, it highlights the value of commensality and hospitality, and it emphasises the value of social relationships to both individuals and between faith and community-based groups themselves.

A whole person, a whole-area and a whole-system approach puts food and eating within a social context, and it can steer faith and community-based groups towards the best practice of keeping people connected to each other, to society and to the spiritual support that faith and community-based groups hold at the heart of their missions.

Maintaining commensality and the ‘more than food’ approach means communicating and acting as a network of providers across a geographical area, for example, to ensure the needs of people experiencing homelessness are catered to in ways that are comprehensive, sustainable, and authentic.

Faith and community-based groups should aim to create services that they would feel proud to access and use and should aim to confidently communicate the value, purpose, scope, and scale of the work they do to ensure other providers and services know who they are, what they do and what they stand for.

So, what does a social eating and ‘more than food’ project look like? In the following section, we walk through an ideal social eating space, which is based on work achieved by exemplar organisations. We list these at the end of the guide, along with suggestions for further reading.

“Every time I ask a person who has moved out of homelessness how they did it, the practicalities of housing, food and possessions are footnotes in their story. The key issues are of friendship, community and belonging.

They’d found a place where they could not only receive support, but contribute into something and build a social network.”

Simon Dwight Specialist Rough Sleeping Adviser – Faith and Community Groups.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

A WALK-THROUGH OF A SOCIAL EATING SERVICE

This walk through is seen through the eyes of a recipient, but we pause regularly to offer practical tips and examples of how groups are creating thoughtful and effective social eating services.

One of the key considerations of a ‘more than food’ approach is to first do some research to find out who and what is already out there and where your service can fit within this context.

No single organisation or person is ever responsible for resolving a person’s housing needs. It requires partnership working and the consent and willingness of the person concerned. Helping people engage with the agencies who have the resources and expertise to support their (often complex) needs is one of the most effective ways faith and community-based organisations can help. Your local council is legally responsible for supporting people experiencing homelessness. Regularly speak to them to ensure you are aware of local issues and the level of need.



The more you know about other organisations work, the better you can shape your service to fill gaps in provision, give recipients something they really need and ensure that all other stakeholders have been contacted and perhaps consulted. Clearly communicating your mission, without duplication, in clear and shareable ways is really important. Other groups can signpost service-users to you, share intelligence and maybe even resources and great volunteers. Understanding people’s challenges and where tensions may arise is possible when groups share information (without breaching confidentiality).

Contact wraparound services such as mental health, dietary, dental health, and veterinary services. Can you offer spaces where clinics and services can also run? The saying goes that people love to congregate around food, and if outreach services want to see people regularly, and people want regular access to services, then it makes sense to combine services where possible. These types of hub-working activities position your organisation as an ‘anchor organisation’ that forms part of the infrastructure of your local community. Anchor organisations are well-networked, they are embedded within communities, they are go-to places for people who need support, and their good works send positive ripples out into their neighbourhoods because they are accomplishing something much ‘more than food’ by hosting a meal service.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING PLACES AND SPACES

However, have already acknowledged that for some groups, providing an indoor meal service is just not possible. However, if your organisation does have a suitable venue, or can gain regular access to one, one of the next things to consider is the outside space, its visibility, and the walk up and access routes into the space. Well-lit venues with clear signage about what is going on within the building are really helpful in making people aware of your service and making it feel acceptable and non-stigmatising.

Please, do not make a banner that reads 'meal for the homeless'! People can be referred and signposted to your service without public reference to their current challenges, and we want to encourage people to feel welcomed without fear of being labelled. By all means, you can maintain some eligibility criteria, you can apply rules about bringing substances such as alcohol onto the premises, for example, but that does not mean you need to advertise your service as being for people experiencing homelessness. An extensive network of contacts with other stakeholders will ensure people can be effectively referred and signposted without relying on you advertising your project in this way.

It is also advisable to have a contact that introduces your project to local neighbours, shopkeepers, the local CPO's and Police and the Local Authority and Public Health contacts. Ensuring any concerns and complaints are swiftly communicated between stakeholders can ensure that your work has maximum impact and minimum push-back from local residents.



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING THE THRESHOLD AND ENTERING THE SPACE

Entering a new space can feel really intimidating to newcomers. Some of the exemplar projects try and ensure that contacts who work on outreach projects are also deployed as 'greeters' so that people entering the space can see a familiar face. Even though people may know that there is a meal service available inside, the concerns raised by respondents show that tensions, disagreements, and fear may keep people from entering spaces where they cannot readily see what is happening and who is present, inside ('respondents' hereon in refers to those people mentioned in the earlier research and evidence sections of this guide).

Propping open a door and having a well-lit entrance can help people to feel reassured about coming inside.



A friendly face to show newcomers around is a really valuable way of helping people to cross the threshold of the space for the first time. Regular attendees can be offered this role as a voluntary post.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING THE SETUP AND STAGING OF A SPACE

In the era of Covid, offering hand sanitiser and hand-washing facilities is crucial. Offer face masks to eaters that they can use whilst queueing and set an example by ensuring volunteers and staff adhere to current best-practice. Lateral flow tests can be acquired from healthcare providers so that people can test themselves before they sit down to eat. If people are unwell, ask them to make this known to staff on entering. Poorly people must self-isolate where possible, so have takeaway food containers ready, so they can receive food and eat it outside. Ventilate your venue and check the Government guidelines regularly and share this information with your staff and volunteers.¹ Clean touchpoints regularly, deep clean the venue after each meal sitting, including sofa covers, for example, again, by following current Government guidelines.²

The way that a venue is lit, heated, set up and staged also has an impact on how people respond to meal services. We know from the commercial food sector that venues go to lengths to dress spaces and create an atmosphere conducive to commensality, and exemplar organisations borrow ideas from other sectors to shape their meal services. Wipeable tablecloths, plants and flowers, herbs in pots – all of these minor details are ways of staging a space effectively.

A venue can use lighting to create a homely atmosphere. Use sidelights, uplighters, and table lamps to create a pleasant and well-lit space. These can be easily plugged in and then removed when the meal service is over. Music is also used to create a pleasant buzz and is another cheap and effective way of creating an atmosphere that can be changed and moved as the service begins and ends.

Some venues have a secure side table where a staff member or volunteer keeps bags and coats so people can eat without clutter at the table. Some groups also provide plug-in heaters to dry wet coats and warm-up clothing before people head back out after the meal.

Requests to be able to pick up clean socks and underwear has also been mentioned in recent studies. These are not food items but can often be offered alongside meal services.

These are all relatively small accommodations that don't have to be too onerous, but they all contribute towards making people feel cared for, relaxed and they stage a meal using clues from other areas of social life such as the home or a restaurant. These space and place-based adjustments are cues for behaviour and go a long way towards helping guide people towards eating amicably with others.

The research respondents extensively mentioned the desire to eat indoors, in spaces that were relaxed, and where food could be enjoyed, digested, and where they could access other services in one place.

¹For up to date, comprehensive information on the current guidelines, check here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-services-for-people-experiencing-rough-sleeping/covid-19-guidance-for-commissioners-and-providers-of-hostel-services-for-people-experiencing-homelessness-and-rough-sleeping#suspected-or-confirmed-cases-of-covid-19>

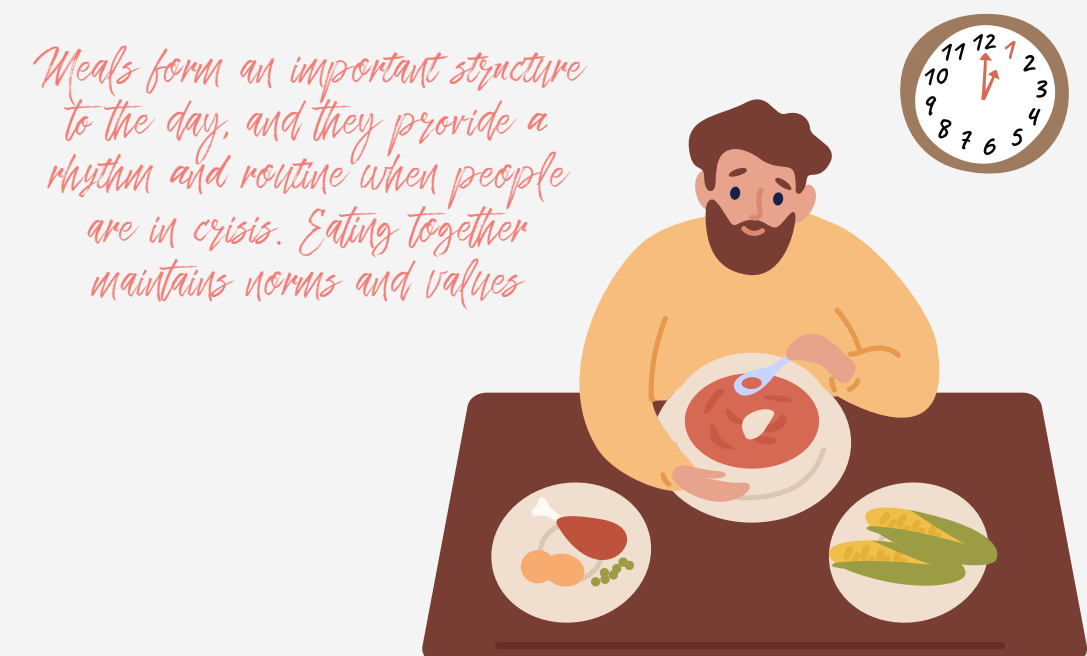
²For up to date cleaning guidelines, check here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING MEAL TIMINGS

After eating indoors around a table, the timings of food services was identified as a key issue by respondents. Meals form an important structure to the day, and they provide a rhythm and routine when people are in crisis. Eating together maintains norms and values, which are ever more important for people who may have lost the routines associated with work, family, and civic life. Research respondents requested more opportunities to eat at 'normal' mealtimes such as lunch, dinner and at weekends. Striving to protect mealtimes was seen as immensely valuable, keeping people tethered to a daily and weekly routine and having beneficial effects on mental health and wellbeing far beyond the mealtime.

Some groups stage two meal servings at lunch and dinner, for example. This means that people have some choice around when to attend, and this means they can avoid certain times where there may be people they do not get along with whilst not having to miss out on the service.

By adopting a 'more than food' approach, organisations value connections to other faith and community-based groups, and they know when other services are running and, therefore, where their service fits into that ecosystem. This is a key feature of the 'more than food' approach – to think carefully about the importance of the meal beyond its nutritional value and the importance of your service beyond the instrumental delivery of that meal. Exemplar projects aim to feed the whole person, they are aware of all other services within their whole-area approach, and they are mindful of where they fit into that local faith and food system.



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING THE QUEUE AND WAITING FOR THE MEAL

Queues outside have been identified as flashpoints for tension. Queues inside can be subject to those same dynamics, and so they require thoughtful management.

Staging the space and timings so that people can either arrive at different sittings and asking people to wash their hands, take off their coats and bags all slows down the process of accessing a meal by breaking it down into parts. Exemplar groups have tea and coffee facilities to the side; some have borrowed or bought sofas with washable covers where people can sit and have a hot drink, read information leaflets, or sign up for other activities. This takes the pressure off the queue space, and it also allows keen diners to turn up early and be seated without disrupting the always-busy kitchen area.

It is also worth mentioning a phenomenon that all community and faith and community-based food providers know well, which is the 'hungry energy' that people bring when they are waiting for food. This can cause flare-ups. Manage expectations by having a clearly signed mealtime. Announce if the food is going to be late, so people are informed about what is happening within the space. Use whiteboards to list the menu so people can see what is available, and cross meals off as soon as they run out so people can avoid being disappointed.

Having tea and coffee facilities allows people to occupy themselves prior to a mealtime which often eases queue related tensions. Be aware that some people may need to sit down and be served at the table, and if it is suitable for your venue, then ask people to sit, and the food can be brought out table-by-table. This also helps keep people from wandering around if the service time is very busy.

Queues outside have been identified as flashpoints for tension. Queues inside can be subject to those same dynamics, and so they require thoughtful management.



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING GETTING AROUND THE TABLE

Everyone has an opinion on food and the types of food they like and dislike. Food is a great conversation topic that most people can contribute to, and these types of conversational topics are commonly used to bridge towards new eaters and between themselves to establish rapport. Many people experiencing homelessness enjoy cooking for themselves and others, they enjoy eating hot, homemade food, and most have positive memories and associations of shared mealtimes.

A meal is a reason to come to a project; a two or three-course meal is a reason to stay. This means meals are an ideal way of building social relationships, meeting and maintaining new friendships, and when staff and volunteers eat with service-users, it forms valuable connection time that is often harder to develop in outdoor or formal settings. If wraparound services are on-site, then invite them to eat with service-users.

People like to have some choice, even if it is between a meat and a vegetarian choice. If possible, make snacks, fruit, water, and extra servings of bread, yoghurts, etc., available on a side table where volunteers can oversee people taking the extras they want. Exemplar projects run occasional themed food activities, and they keep the kitchen door and serving hatch areas open so people can feel confident about the food being prepared.

Without the capacity to cook and eat, food skills can be lost, and people struggle to engage in the reciprocity and hospitality at the core of our common food culture. Therefore, social eating services can help protect and enrich a person's quality of life, even if they are not currently housed or able to engage in domestic commensality, by offering choice and chances to get involved.

Logistically, projects who already offer vegetable-rich foods could advise other providers on how to do this logistically and cost-effectively. Popular dishes are the perennially loved roast dinner, but stews, curries, pasta dishes, salads, fruit salads, and homemade desserts are always enjoyed. Inviting eaters to make menu suggestions and giving people the opportunity to try new foods via small taster dishes with extra food to takeaway was also requested. By larger-scale and batch cooking, fuel and food can be conserved, and by tapping into networks such as the national surplus food redistribution charity, FareShare, groups can access affordable, fresh foodstuffs, which includes meat and dairy products.



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING CLEARING DOWN AND PACKING AWAY

Helping out makes people feel good. Getting involved in washing up, taking down tables and sweeping up after a mealtime are simple and informal ways that people can contribute to their social eating project.

Even if you are serving people at their tables, it is good practice to ask people to scrape down and stack away their plates, to put leftovers in the bin or in composting facilities and to stack chairs away, for example. Making a contribution to a space builds a sense of ownership, responsibility and belonging. Do not underestimate these small acts of service; they are 'micro connections' that build experiences of connection and wellbeing, as well as bonding people to the wider community.

These are also transitional times when people may hang around after the meal. This can often be because they want to talk in confidence or have some issue they want to discuss. Keeping people's hands busy with washing up, for example, means that conversations can flow more easily without the feelings of intimidation that often accompany face to face discussions.



FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING HOSTING WRAPAROUND SERVICES AT SOCIAL EATING SPACES

Having a meal service run from a physical venue can better-enable the inclusion of wraparound services. This creates hub and anchor spaces where people know they can access good food, enjoy company, and also get extra support when needed. As mentioned previously, respondents requested form-filling and welfare advice and debt support, credit union, hairdressing and barbering services, dentistry, vaccination, dietary, substance abuse and veterinary services. Access to washing machines, dryers, fresh socks, pants, warm clothes, and hygiene products was also requested. Having a physical space, even if it runs monthly, was still seen as an important way of delivering 'more than food' services that attend to a person's overall wellbeing. And having indoor services also help services create a base, sometimes with cupboard space or lockable rooms where forms and non-valuable equipment could be locked away.

The opportunity to volunteer, get involved in food preparation and cooking activities, gain qualifications, and build social networks was also deemed important by research respondents.

One practical method of communication that really helped during the Pandemic was the use of WhatsApp for creating groups and sub-groups where information and requests or offers of help could be rapidly shared. Think about setting up a WhatsApp group where event and activity information can be looked up by staff, volunteers, and partners. People don't always have to contribute but being able to access these conversations is useful. Screenshotting a local area provision timetable and being able to share this with people out on the street or at hostels is a useful way of enabling them to see what services are available. Group text messaging people to remind them that a wraparound service is being hosted, for example, is a quick and easy way of encouraging people to attend.

Exemplar groups also set up sub-groups with specialists and expertise focus on ex-offenders and care-leavers, for example. They spend time building up networks, identifying and linking with partners and holding online planning events before setting up services or for planning service provision over the winter months. They have dedicated contacts for the sub-groups, and all stakeholders are aware of their go-to contacts. Bringing in expertise, especially from those with lived experience to gain insight into food provision for those intersectional attributes such as being female, non-binary or disabled, can help address gaps in provision for the 'hidden homeless'.

If your organisation cannot facilitate a sub-group, you should still consider joining and contributing to one and using their referral channels to give your recipients the best possible routes to targeted support. These groups are often inter-organisation and inter-faith based, hosted by Local Authorities or larger faith and community-based groups, and they are a vital part of a food service ecosystem that ensures duplication and gaps are avoided, and accountability and best-practice are maintained.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING WHERE NEXT? SIGNPOSTING CUSTOMERS TO FURTHER SERVICES AND SUPPORT

What happens after the mealtime? Exemplar projects are aware of what else is ‘out there’, and they take the time to signpost people to the next service, to additional support and ensure their service-users have what they need to go back out onto the streets when possible. Make takeaway containers available if you know that people need an extra portion for themselves or for others they may be caring for.

The logistics of purchasing, storing, and preparing food are both part of the enjoyment many people feel in cooking and caring for others, but they are also hard work. They are also regulated by food hygiene standards. For groups, especially networked ones, building links with Local Authorities can also create opportunities to procure foods as a group. Either by buying in bulk through catering contacts or even commissioning local providers to bulk-cook meals which can be heated and served at venues with limited kitchen facilities, ideas that come from partnership working can help make the meal-end of the project easier cheaper, and safer.

The ‘more than food’ approach we have promoted throughout this guide is intended to give you the rationale and research evidence to design your own social eating service. Life in the UK would be much improved if everyone had access to warm, welcoming, sociable eating spaces within their communities. Part of the work that faith and community-based exemplars, and groups from across the spectrum of community food providers, do, is to manage and maintain the social infrastructure that underpins our shared social life. The approach of this guide is to prompt organisations to think through how best to manifest their missions to bring love, hope, dignity and whole-person sustenance into being.

“As across the country, when the pandemic first hit, a range of vital support services were made to stop overnight. Many were unable to leave their homes and levels of hunger and isolation across the city increased. Within a week, The Active Wellbeing Society worked with a range of voluntary sector partners, food banks and food providers, along with Birmingham City Council to set up a central city wide food distribution hub. This movement began under the name #BrumTogether. We set up open access WhatsApp groups where partners could post requests for support or offer assistance, with regular virtual meetings to enable the coordination of resources and the escalation of barriers partners were facing on the ground.

This collective is now called the Food Justice Network and has grown to over 200 organisations and individuals across the city working together to tackle food poverty and food insecurity, ranging from food coordination, food growing initiatives, campaigning and strategic work to change the current food system to one which is equal, fair and accessible. The Active Wellbeing Society facilitates the network, with all organisations practising distributive leadership – sharing power amongst all members and ensuring we’re all working to reflect and amplify lived experiences.”

Amit Dattani, The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS).

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING EXEMPLAR ‘MORE THAN FOOD’ PROJECTS

“The Feed is a social enterprise with a mission to motivate change in order to prevent poverty, hunger and homelessness in Norwich. We support people who are facing insecurity with their housing, or who face a barrier to employment, such as mental ill health, substance misuse, history of offending and learning difficulties. We are passionate about food and passionate about people.

In April this year, we launched our Nourish service, offering a hot evening meal in a safe indoor space, 6 days a week. We run the service on a referral basis, inviting clients from homelessness organizations, hostels, and other agencies to ensure that those who are most vulnerable can access nutritious food. We partner with a local church, who run the meal service on Sundays, and a school, who generously donate meals for us to serve. Our team of twenty trained volunteers offer signposting, or just a friendly ear to anyone who needs a chat. To date we have served over 1300 meals.

In early 2022 we’ll open our Social Supermarket, where those who have moved from homelessness or hostels into more permanent accommodation can access low-cost food, cooking equipment and classes to help build knowledge, independence and confidence.”

Andrea Auburn, The Feed, Norwich.

These are not all faith and community-based, or homeless-focused projects but they are all exemplars at providing ‘more than food’ services to their local communities. From staging spaces to innovative food outreach services, to partnering with local gardens, growers, and affordable grocery services, these are all exemplar projects that you can learn from.

[Emmanuel House](#) Nottingham.

[FareShare](#) Branches nationwide.

[FoodHall Project](#) Sheffield.

[FoodCycle](#) Branches nationwide.

[FoodWorks](#) Sheffield.

[Inn Churches](#) Bradford.

[Migrateful](#) London.

[Open Kitchen Social Club](#) Sheffield.

[Places of Welcome](#) Branches nationwide.

[The Active Wellbeing Society](#) Birmingham.

[That Bread-and-Butter Thing](#) Manchester.

[The Feed](#) Norwich.

[The Gatehouse](#) Oxford.

[The Hygiene Bank](#) branches nationwide.

[The National Food Service](#) branches nationwide.

[The Nottingham Social Eating Network](#) Nottingham.

[Transforming Notts Together](#) Nottingham.

FROM STREET FEEDING TO SOCIAL EATING

FURTHER READING, REFERENCES AND CREDITS

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[‘A community-based participatory research approach to understanding social eating for food well-being’](#), Research note, Emerald Open Access, Jun 2021.

[‘How creative food activities can promote self-care’](#), The British Academy blog, May 2019.

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