

Response to ‘Choosing the Right Ingredients’ from 2 focus groups, carried out by East Lothian Council’s Homelessness Unit with homeless households in temporary accommodation.

Introduction

In Autumn 2007, the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government agreed that a national food policy is needed for Scotland. A national discussion paper “Choosing the right ingredients: the future of food in Scotland” was published by the Scottish Government and comments were sought. Community Food and Health (Scotland) (CFHS) believe that the experience and understanding of disadvantaged communities is crucial in ensuring future policy around food is inclusive and effective. To gain responses from disadvantaged communities, CFHS offered funding to support local consultation on the future of food in Scotland. East Lothian Councils Homelessness Unit received £100 to carry out consultation via focus groups with homeless households in temporary accommodation. The money was spent on providing “incentives” for the participants to take part.

The aim of the research was two fold:

1. To inform a national plan for food in Scotland, to be delivered by the Scottish Government
2. To inform the Homelessness Units future plans for assisting households to maintain their health while they are homeless

The research methods used were 2 focus groups and questionnaires. The participants were selected using purposive sampling and the criteria were that participants had to be homeless and living in temporary accommodation. The first focus group took place in Musselburgh on the 26th March with 2 single mothers. The second took place on the 9th of April with 5 women living in refuge accommodation provided by East Lothian Women’s Aid. Consent was gained from all participants. The focus group discussions were recorded and the recordings were destroyed once the content had been transcribed. The discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed for themes of barriers, knowledge, and attitudes towards food.

The participants were asked to complete short questionnaires which explored what resources they would like to be available to them while they are homeless (see appendix 1 for a copy). This report presents the findings from both focus groups and the questionnaires. The final section makes recommendations, based on the findings, on what the Scottish Government could do in relation to producing a food policy that includes the needs of homeless households.

The focus groups were loosely structured around the following topic areas:

- ? Is there enough choice?
- ? Contribution to well-being
- ? Is it good for us?
- ? Food production

Participant characteristics

Gender

7 females

Age groups

How old are you?	Numbers
16-25	1
26-40	4
41-51	0
51-60	2
60+	0
Total	7

Household details

Are you?	Numbers
Single	1
Single parent	6
Couple with children	0
Couple without children	0

Children

How many children do you have?	Numbers
1	2
2	1
3	2
4	0
7	1
Total = 17 children	

Children's ages

How old are your children?	Numbers
0-2	1
3-5	2
6-8	2
9-11	1
12-16	1
16+	10
Total = 17 children	

Findings from focus group 1

Introduction

This report presents the findings from focus group 1 held with 2 single mothers in the Musselburgh area. Both participants had 1 child each and were housed in temporary accommodation provided by East Lothian Councils Homelessness Unit.

The participants were given £10 worth of vouchers to spend at the Fruit and Vegetable coop and café at the Musselburgh East Community Learning Centre (MECA) where the focus group took place. They were also given information on why the research was being carried out and what would happen with the findings.

The main part of the discussion focused on “is there enough choice” but other areas discussed were “is it good for us” and “food production”.

Main findings

The participants discussed “is there enough choice” in a local context, describing what food shops were available in their local area (Musselburgh). The participants agreed that there was enough choice for buying food but their budget restricted what shops they could use. Low cost supermarkets were favoured (Iceland, Farm foods, Aldi), however there were issues described by the participants with using these. One participant did not like to use them because the carrier bags advertised, “Where you’ve been”. They believed these bags advertised that you were living on a budget and that there was stigma attached to using these types of low cost supermarkets. Other issues mentioned in relation to low cost supermarkets were the limited choices of fruit and vegetables, especially the frozen food shops. The benefits of using frozen fruit and vegetables were discussed and a barrier identified to using frozen goods was that storing frozen foods could be an issue depending on the size of the freezer in the temporary unit(s). It was recognised that Aldi provided good quality, low cost fresh fruit and vegetables but that you couldn’t do a “proper” weeks shop as there are items they do not stock such as cleaning products and baby foods.

The participants described that to get the best deals and offers on food that matched their budgets they had to shop at a number of different shops. The participants agreed that food shopping dominated their daily activities, as they had to shop about. “I’d like to use just one shop but that’s almost impossible when you’re on a budget. You need to shop around to get the best deals”.

The discussion then led to “late-night opening hours” and a recognition there were few shops that were open late-night, and even fewer that were open late and sold baby milk/ foods in the locality. This was an issue for parents with children and no transport. “You’re always thinking ahead, do I have enough of this or that”. One reason that parents preferred to shop later at night was that the supermarkets often reduced certain products, including fruit and vegetables, after 8 pm. Shopping late-night opened up doors to accessing organic fruit and vegetables that had been reduced. “I’ve bought organic fruit and vegetables when it’s been reduced, you can taste the difference but full price – it’s out of my budget”.

One participant mentioned the limited types of healthy “treats” for children in supermarkets. For example there are few sweets made from natural fruit juices such as lollies or chews and when they are available (from whole food stores) they’re expensive.

The barrier to accessing food most frequently mentioned by the participants was their lack of transport to carry shopping home. Both agreed that using public transport with

shopping and children was a stressful experience, and that taxis were out of the question due to their budget. Ability to transport shopping home also impacted on the number of times a week parents had to shop. One participant whose child was young enough to still be using a buggy stated, "I use my buggy to get heavy shopping home – I suppose I'm lucky, but when they're (child) walking I don't know how I will manage". The problems with local public transport was mentioned by one participant who described the problems of using public transport services to get to Musselburgh to access the choice of shops. This participant had been temporarily accommodated in a B+B in Dunbar. "To get the choice then you need to travel to Musselburgh, if your living in Dunbar (in the South of the locality) you're looking at £4.50 return fare on the bus and nearly 2 hours in travel time. It's hard to entertain a kid that long on a bus".

One participant expressed concern about the impact that supermarkets had on accessing local produce from local shops. "I spoke to a shop owner and asked why he didn't sell local produce, we've loads of local farms. He said it was difficult because local farmers had signed contracts with the big supermarkets and they were not allowed to sell to other buyers. He has to go to Newcastle for his stock!" The participant expressed that the Scottish Government should have more control over what restrictions supermarket chains can impose on local growers so that local people can access local foods. They also described the contradictions delivered by the Scottish Government in accessing local produce to reduce environmental impacts but that by allowing supermarkets to control local growers, this could not be achieved.

The Scottish Government came in to the discussion in relation to the healthy eating agenda. There were several sides to the discussion including contradictions in healthy eating messages, lack of support (information and money) to make healthy changes and lack of understanding of issues faced by parents living on benefits. Contradictions in healthy eating messages centred on the range of agencies that can produce information and how reliable this information actually is. There was consensus that the Scottish Government health agencies should have total control over what information is made available to the public and that this information had to be factually correct. The lack of support issue was two-fold. The first was about accessing health information from reputable sources. For example, where information was available (libraries, GPs, baby clinics, internet etc) and who produced the information. The second was that families living on benefits couldn't have a healthy diet. This belief prevailed throughout the discussion and a hurdle that both participants felt the Scottish Government had to address "Everything is going up in price but our benefits do not match this, how can we eat well when the good food is so expensive?"

The discussion came around to food vouchers for babies (the Healthy Start scheme). One participant explained that when they moved from emergency to temporary accommodation they had lost contact with Healthy Start and, as a result, had not received vouchers for some time. The participant stated that they had reapplied and hoped to receive the vouchers soon, however, it appears that this is a common problem experienced by homeless households as they move from emergency to temporary then permanent housing (1). The participants also stated that some local shops would not accept the vouchers as they had experienced problems reclaiming the money from Healthy Start.

The participants were asked if they ever chose low salt/ sugar options that are available for some food products. The responses reflect the above issue of "is this information correct?" The participants were dubious about how much salts/ sugars had been removed from foods as media had reported that some manufactures had reduced salt/ sugar content by a minimal amount but could claim it was "low" or "reduced" on the label. The fact that some of the low salt/ sugar options were more expensive was also mentioned as a barrier to not using these products.

The final area discussed was food production, or more concisely what to do with food packaging once the food has been used. The discussion explored local recycling and rubbish disposal facilities. One participant described their experience using East Lothian Councils recycling initiative. They were keen to recycle but council restrictions limited what they could do. The issues were storing the recycle boxes in their flats; they take up lots of room and can cause a hazard if there left in communal hallways. One participant did not use the boxes as they didn't like having rubbish lying around the house especially with a small child. The other participant used the boxes but found they filled them quickly and stated the council would not collect them if they were over filled so they still sometimes had to put recyclable goods in the landfill bin. Another barrier to using recycle facilities was that the participants were not sure what could and couldn't go in the boxes. A suggestion from one participant in relation to the councils recycling facilities was that the council should adopt "the German way of recycling" (on street collection and the "green dot" system where by supermarkets have to reduce packaging on foods or pay a price) (2)

Findings from focus group 2

Introduction

The second of the food focus groups took place at a Women's Aid refuge in East Lothian. The participants were selected using purposive sampling i.e. they were homeless and living in temporary (refuge) accommodation. 5 participants took part and between them were given £30 of fruit and vegetables from a local organic farm as thanks.

The second focus group discussed the topics of "is there enough choice", "contribution to well-being", "is it good for us" and "food production". Some of the areas discussed in focus group 2 were as focus group 1 but produced quite different themes. This could be attributed to the differing characteristics between the participants of focus group 1 and 2.

Main findings

The first part of the discussion looked at "is there enough choice". Again the participants discussed this in a local context, describing the shops available and the food they sold. The participants discussed both the company owned supermarkets and local owned shops.

The participants expressed that they would prefer to use another supermarket other than the two available in the town. Of the two supermarkets available, one is a large chain supermarket with a monopoly, the other is a low cost supermarket. The reasons given for preferring an alternative supermarket (ASDA) was that it had more choice of foods, food was cheaper and it was easier to "find your way around". Another issue was that the local supermarkets lacked choice in relation to healthy eating options, especially in ready made meals for one person. Barriers mentioned to using shops in other localities, or the city (Edinburgh) were the issues of transport, costs and safety. For the participants to use their preferred supermarket it would cost £5 (return) bus fares and, as focus group 1, there was discussion around the problems of using public transport when carrying lots of shopping bags. There was also the issue of safety for the participants, as some would not feel safe in other towns or the city.

The participants discussed the choice of local shops, which include a butcher, fishmonger and fruit shop. There was consensus that the local owned shops were expensive, however, the quality of the food they sold was very good. One participant from a minority ethnic background explained that the food types they ate were not available at all in East Lothian so any food shopping done had to be in the city. The issues described in relation to accessing their food preferences were time and costs.

The interviewer asked if any one chose to eat organic food. None of the participants did and this was solely attributed to the cost. There was agreement that non-organic fruit was expensive so organic fruit was "out of the question". Discussion arose from this around cost and quantity. One of the supermarkets in the locality did sell reasonably priced fruit that was of good quality. However, the fruit sold came in packs. The quandary that arose was it worked out to be better financial value to buy this knowing that some of the fruit would be wasted. The general consensus was that supermarkets did not cater for single people, as the best deals were only available on large amounts of food. "It's unfortunate that to get the best value you have to buy in bulk but when you're by yourself you never use all the food so it goes to waste".

Two barriers to buying food in bulk (and thus saving money) were identified. The first, as just described, is wastage; the second is getting the food home once bought. There is not a bus service that runs the route from refuge to supermarket so all shopping has to be physically carried home. The interviewer asked if there were any issues with getting food home from the local shops and supermarkets. The participants agreed that this was an issue that prevented them from bulk buying but, as they could not bulk buy, they could manage but only because they were buying small amounts of food for themselves “the shops aren’t that far away and I’m only buying for one so I can usually manage”. One participant explained that they were not able to carry much so they were at the shops every day.

The participants were asked if they ever chose low salt/ sugar options of foods and they agreed “no” due to the lack of flavour of these products. It was agreed that reducing salt/ sugar also reduced the taste. The concept of “moderation” was first mentioned when discussing reduced salt/ sugar foods but arose in other areas of the discussion. The feel from the participants was that you could eat what you want and stay healthy as long as all food groups (carbohydrates, fats, sugar and protein) were eaten in moderation. The issues were knowing what types of food to eat and how much should be eaten.

The participants were asked if they needed to access shops late at night, as this was a considerable issue for the participants in focus group 1. None of the participants stated that this was an issue.

The second area of discussion was “food and contribution to well-being”. The participants were asked whether they made conscious healthy choices when buying food. The participants described the choices they made in relation to their health. One participant made a conscious choice to eat less red meat and to remove the skin from chicken and the fat from bacon. Another participant chose brown bread even though they preferred white. They attributed this conscious dietary change to a (potential) hereditary and fatal health condition that had affected a number of family members.

One participant described how they felt when they first came to the refuge, acknowledging that their experience effected their well-being but stating that eating a healthy diet and taking regular exercise had impacted positively on their mental well-being. They stated that by eating well, joining a local gym and swimming regularly had improved their feelings of well-being and assisted them to feel more in control of their situation.

The discussion moved on to “is it good for us”. Here the participants discussed the amount of food eaten (portions) and food preparation. Again the theme of “moderation” arose in relation to portion sizes. The participants stated that with many ready made meals there was too much in the packet “not enough for two but too much for one”. Another participant disagreed, saying that a supermarkets “deluxe” range (Tesco’s Finest range) of meals for one person “were too small, especially in relation to price”. Portion size was identified as an issue because some portions were so large that food was wasted, especially take away food (including sandwiches), loaves of bread, salad bags and certain vegetables (cabbages, turnips).

One participant expressed that they felt food and diets had changed quite dramatically since they were young and that this was due to a change in technologies and women’s traditional roles in the family home. They felt that since the introduction of the fridge and the change in women’s roles, diets had changed for the worst. “I think fridges have changed the way we eat because you used to have to go out

everyday, buy fresh food and cook from scratch, there wasn't convenience this or that. Everything was fresh and hand prepared but people don't have the time to do that now". The participant also acknowledged that the tradition of families eating together had changed as traditional roles and lifestyles had changed.

The participants discussed cooking skills and how they felt that fewer people now had cooking skills. One participant stated that children didn't get involved in food preparation any more "children used to muck in too, they would peel veg and help bake cakes. Getting to eat the cake at the end was a treat". The participants frequently mentioned the concept of "treats" and made links with this and moderation. Some participants discussed their childhood days and described fruit as a treat especially the non-British fruits that have become readily available such as kiwi fruit and bananas. One participant stated that "crisps and biscuits used to be a treat.....now there seen as an everyday essential rather than a treat". The themes of moderation and treats compliment each other when exploring changes in dietary habits over the years. As the public have greater access to all food types and most foods being available all year round, attitudes towards food have changed. Few foods would be acknowledged to be a treat and constant availability means food does not have to be consumed in moderation.

Another area of "is it good for us" covered by a participant was that of using microwaves and whether or not they are safe to use in relation to the potential health impacts of ingesting radiation. One participant did not use microwaves as they were not sure what health risks they really posed.

The final section of the discussion explored "food and the environment". This discussion followed on from a participants comment on the availability of "exotic" fruits. The participant stated, "I'd never even heard of a kiwi till I was in my 20's and although we have access to more fruit now think of the impact transporting all of this has on the environment".

The participants were asked whether they had anything they would like to say about food and the environment. One participant answered that packaging on food was a issue for them. "It angers me that there's so much packaging on foods, everything is wrapped and wrapped again. I wouldn't mind if it could be recycled but so much plastic has to go in the normal (landfill) bin". The participant recommended, "the shops should take responsibility to do something about the packaging. There's only some much the council can do when it comes to reducing waste".

The participants then discussed a "carrier bag tax". Participants agreed that a carrier bag tax should be introduced as:

1. Some shops already charged for carrier bags (Aldi and Lidl) and it did not stop people shopping there.
2. The participants identified "green" areas next to supermarkets that were spoilt as they had plastic carrier bags in trees and bushes, and supermarket trolleys abandoned in fields and burns.
3. Some supermarkets (Tesco and Sainsbury's) awarded "points" to customers when they bought long life carrier bags. These points were added to "club card" type schemes giving the customers a little incentive to buy long life carrier bags.

Questionnaire findings

The participants were asked if they would like to attend cookery sessions to learn new skills. 6 participants said yes and 1 said no.

The participants that said yes were then asked what skills they would like to develop

What are the skills you would like to develop?	(Please tick as many as you like)
Learn to cook at a beginners level	2
Learn to cook at an intermediate level	0
Learn to cook foreign foods (such as Italian, Chinese)	5
Learn to cook cakes and pastries	4
Other – please specify =	0

The participants were asked if they would like to know more about the healthy eating related services available locally

5 participants said yes

2 participants said no

The participants were asked if they would use a service that provided healthy food and a chance to socialise/ meet new people

5 participants said yes

2 participants said no

What information would you like on food and healthy eating?	(Tick as many as you like)
Basic recipes	5
More complicated/ adventurous recipes	3
Healthy eating on a budget	6
Healthy eating for one person	4
Healthy eating for packed lunches and picnics	4
Good food for babies/ toddlers	2
Information on nutrition and vitamins	3
Food and mood (how healthy eating can help with some mental health conditions)	5
What healthy food services are available in your local area	5
Food and the environment (transportation and carbon emissions)	3
What recycling services are available in your local area (for disposing of food packaging)	4
Fair-trade food products	4
Organic food products	4
Vegetarian diet	3
Vegan diet	0

The participants were asked if they had any other comments they would like to make about the food discussion. The responses were:

- ? The discussion was very informative as it went in to a lot of topics
- ? Shops should be cheaper
- ? Supermarkets must use less packaging on their foods

Recommendations

The Scottish Government could work with Local Authorities to:

1. Minimise the problem of households losing contact with Healthy Start when they move. This could be achieved by:
 - A. Putting information on Healthy Start in tenants handbooks (in East Lothian all households moving in to council properties have access to an information book that gives information on a variety of topics including local services. They also include information on retailers accepting Healthy Start vouchers)
 - B. Working with health visitors and midwives to explore options for informing Healthy Start of changes of addresses
2. Encourage Local Authorities to advertise (via tenants handbooks, bulletins and websites) to all residents, not just homeless households, where healthy eating information can be found (listing library and internet sites). This would include information on accessing local producers and local services such as cookery classes and social eating groups (lunch clubs etc)
3. Include recycling information in tenant's handbooks and explore options for getting information out to all residents. This would include information on what can be recycled and what happens to these items after they have been collected
4. Support LA Community Development Teams to explore with their communities, what they would like in relation to teaching sessions around food and assist in the development of services (via funding). This would include asking women in refuges of their needs and wants.

The Scottish Government could:

1. Encourage supermarkets to offer healthy choices at a reduced cost and to do this consistently – not just one off offers
2. Encourage supermarkets to stock and promote healthy affordable treats for children
3. Have more control over “supermarket domination” to ensure that locally produced foods are available to those living locally
4. Introduce a carrier bag tax and encourage supermarkets, for a limited period, to offer reusable carriers bags free of charge. This would reduce the environmental impact of waste plastics and reduce stigma in relation to using lower cost supermarkets and the carrier bags advertising this fact
5. Operate a “green dot” system to reduce packaging on shop bought foods
6. Work with supermarkets to develop a scheme whereby families receiving Healthy Start vouchers get their food delivered to their home for free
7. Work with Healthy Start and retailers to identify and resolve any issues or barriers that prevents shops accepting the vouchers
8. Promote the message of moderation in food consumption and how this can be achieved
9. Produce healthy eating information that is factually correct, widely available (to the public and health professionals), and demonstrates how healthy eating on a budget is possible (possibly through menu cards made available, and in conjunction with supermarkets).
10. Work with transport agencies to reduce travel costs for households on benefits via a concession scheme.

References

(1) Health Visitors in the East Lothian area working with homeless families report that it is common for families frequently on the move to lose contact with Healthy Start and Income Support

(2) See website for more info

<http://www.howtogermany.com/pages/recycling.html>

Appendix

Focus group discussion on food: participant questionnaire

1. Are you?	Please tick
Male	
Female	

2. How old are you?	Please tick
16-25	
26-40	
41-51	
51-60	
60+	

3. Are you?	Please tick
Single	
Single parent	
Couple with children	
Couple without children	

4. How many children do you have?	Please tick
1	
2	
3	
4	

5. How old are your children?	Please state how many children are in each age band
0-2	
3-5	
6-8	
9-11	
12-16	
16+	

6. Would you attend cookery sessions to learn new skills?	Please tick
Yes (please go to question 7)	
No (please go to question 8)	

7. What are the skills you would like to develop?	(Please tick as many as you like)
Learn to cook at a beginners level	
Learn to cook at an intermediate level	
Learn to cook foreign foods (such as Italian, Chinese)	
Learn to cook cakes and pastries	
Other – please specify	

8. Would you like to know more about local healthy eating services (such as the MECA food coop and café)	Please tick
Yes	
No	

9. Would you use a service that provided healthy food and a chance to socialise/ meet new people?	Please tick
No	
Yes	

10. What information would you like on food and healthy eating?	(Tick as many as you like)
Basic recipes	
More complicated/ adventurous recipes	
Healthy eating on a budget	
Healthy eating for one person	
Healthy eating for packed lunches	
Good food for babies/ toddlers	
Information on nutrition and vitamins	
Food and mood (how healthy eating can help with some mental health conditions)	
What healthy food services are available in your local area	
Food and the environment (transportation and carbon emissions)	
What recycling services are available in your local area (for disposing of food packaging)	
Fair-trade food products	
Organic food products	
Vegetarian diet	
Vegan diet	
Other (please specify)	

Are there any other comments you would like to make about the food discussion?

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Thank you for completing this questionnaire