

“It’s no Gordon Ramsay”

Food security and the experience of coping for two groups; young mothers and single men living in a rural Scottish town

Abstract

The research was conducted a by a group of community participant researchers exploring the experience of food security and insecurity and how this was reflected in the choices and attitudes of individuals in their community. The work is an ideographic study that applies the principles of Participant Action Research (PAR) and focuses on lived experienced of participants. The study outlines a range of personal strategies used to cope with the experience of food insecurity relating to shopping behaviours, domestic routine, the significance of food and mealtimes, social exclusion and the management of personal desires and choice. The report concludes with recommendations for community action.

Background to the research

The study outlined here was conducted in partnership with Community Food and Health Scotland as part of wider investigation of the experience of food poverty in three Scottish communities. Food security and the relative insecurity of those living on a restricted budget is a major concern in a number of Scottish communities. It is well documented that the levels of food aid provided by a range of third sector agencies has been increasing (Sosenko, Livingstone & Fitzpatrick 2013). Recent changes in welfare benefits may also lead to higher numbers of families and individuals experiencing deepening levels of food poverty (Douglas et al 2014). A recent statement by NHS Scotland (2015) has identified concerns regarding the growing numbers of people affected by food poverty in Scotland and the impact of this on wellbeing. The statement stresses that there is a pressing need to better understand the social and economic factors that contribute to this problem and how these may be addressed more effectively. NHS Scotland (2015) has adopted the Dowler definition which defines food poverty as;

‘The inability to acquire or consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.’ Dowler 2003.

It is also recognised that the experience of food poverty is complex and influenced by an array of cultural, social and environmental factors that work together in complex ways to affect the behaviour of individuals. ‘Rising living costs, increasing food (and energy) costs, low wages, job insecurity and changes to the welfare system (including benefit sanctions) have impacted the number of people experiencing food poverty.’ (NHS 2015). Despite the increasing scale and intensity of the problem there is very little reliable data regarding the extent and experience of food poverty in Scotland (Douglas et al 2015) Very little is known about how these pressures are experienced by individuals and families and how they then shape behaviours, choices, understandings and attitudes towards food. Health Scotland has suggested there is an ‘...urgent need to develop better means of measurement and understanding of individuals’ and families’ lived experiences of food insecurity in Scotland, to help develop, and make the case for, effective policy solutions...’ (Douglas et al 2015). The present document hopes to make some small contribution to a better understanding of these issues and how they shape and influence the lives of people in Scotland today.

Research Purpose and key questions

The purpose of the present research is to highlight the experience of people affected by food insecurity and in so doing attempt to shed some light on the factors both material and emotional that impinge on food choices, shape behaviours and attitudes towards food, shopping and diet. The study examines the experience of two groups of researcher participants, young mothers and single men, living in one of the chosen communities, a rural Scottish town. Key questions addressed include: How do you experience coping on a highly restrictive food budget? What are the routines and habits that shape your diet and that of your family? What shopping choices do you make and why? How able do you feel you are as a cook? How do these issues affect you emotionally and socially?

Healthy Living Networks Scottish Borders

Healthy Living Networks (HLN) is a team within NHS Borders Public Health Improvement Team. HLN staff and volunteers work in a number of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods of the Borders. Activities include a wide variety of health education programmes with a particular emphasis on healthy eating within a limited budget as well as a range of other health related initiatives in association with other health colleagues and

community partners.. The approach is one of developing community capacity and resources to build more resilient, adaptable and empowered individuals, families and groups who are able to make positive choices for health.

Research Approach

The research approach adopted in our element of the project most closely follows what Chevalier and Buckles (2013) have described as Participant Action Research (PAR). This approach attempts to ally formal research and understanding with a commitment to social and personal change and empowerment. Baum, MacDougall and Smith (2006) describe this process as one of ‘...collective self-reflective inquiry that researcher and participants undertake so that they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves.’ p 834. PAR advocates a close collaborative working relationship is established between researchers and participants in which both come to share equally in the investigative and analytical process and a joint commitment to taking action on the basis of the new insights achieved. The approach is ideographic and focused on the lived experience of the participant researchers and therefore ideally suited to our task which is one of understanding the choices attitudes and feelings of individuals experiencing food insecurity.

Establishing the research team

Both groups of researcher participants were self-selecting and identified through informal contacts made by locality NHS staff and Community Learning and Development colleagues. The research team was brought together for a number of informal discussions about the nature of food security and how this impacted on their lives and on the lives of other members of their community before they were asked to make a commitment to the research process. Volunteer researchers were recruited from community contacts made via the local Early Years Centre and Community School, Healthy Living Network group memberships and other opportunistic contacts. Participant researchers were self selecting. Having gained the agreement of the participant researchers a number of meetings were arrange at which input from Health Scotland staff supported a short training programme for the team. Members of the research team attended four training sessions two of these sessions were supported by members of the Community Food and Health Scotland (CHS) project team. The training

addressed issues such as, an introduction to food security, the role and responsibilities of community researchers, confidentiality and research ethics, conducting semi-structured interviews and identifying a research question. It was also agreed to commission a community film maker to record the research process and help facilitate data gathering through audio recordings and video diaries. The role of the film maker involved facilitating data collection, training researchers in video production and recording skills using mobile phone technology. The aim was to produce a 'video' report to sit alongside the written research report. It was envisaged that the final research report would be made up of two halves the written report and a short video providing a more accessible cultural document that could be used in 'reporting back' to the local community. After a small number of community researchers withdrew from the process the final research team included a Health Improvement Specialist, Community Learning and Development Worker working closely with a group of six local community members with support and advice being offered by colleagues at CHS.

Data collection and analysis

The full research team met on a number of occasions to discuss key research questions and how best to gather appropriate data. Initial discussions identified four 'target groups' for study: young mothers with families, single men living alone, teenagers and the elderly. Due to practical limitations of time and commitment the four groups were reduced to two: 'young mothers with families' and 'single men living alone' the two groups that reflected most closely the make-up of the community research group. Data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews with the participant researcher group and a further three external participants. Focus group discussions with young mothers led by the participant researchers were video recorded. A number of the male community researchers also kept video food diaries. The three sources of data were then presented back to the community researcher group and used to stimulate sharing of common and disparate experiences in turn generating new insights and perspectives on our research questions. These discussions and interviews were recorded using a small hand-held recording device or filmed using smart phones. The study examined the experience of six community researchers consisting of three women aged between twenty-five and thirty-two years and three men aged between thirty and forty-eight years of age. A further six community members also took part in the research solely as participants. Three women aged between twenty-six and thirty-four and three men aged

between fifty and fifty-seven years of age. The data was selectively transcribed and shared with members of the research team who identified common themes and compared and contrasted responses to the experience of food security/insecurity.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to investigate the experience of single men living alone. The research group identified a schedule of eight questions with supporting prompts to facilitate the interview process (Appendix 1).. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour and ranged widely across issues related to food choices, budget, cooking, patterns of eating and the experience of eating alone and with others. A total of six participants including participant researchers were interviewed.

Focus Group

The focus groups were used as a means of holding discussions with young mothers affected by food security issues. Discussion was based around a list of questions based on that used in discussions with the single men but allowing for difference in experience and choices experienced by the young women. The three female community researchers took part in the focus group discussion with a further three young mothers. The discussion was recorded by the filmmaker.

Video diaries

Two male community researchers each kept a daily video and photo diary of their meals and main purchases. In addition, one community researcher made a video diary account of a typical supermarket shop

Ethical considerations

All participant researchers, focus group and semi-structured interview participants were given a verbal overview of the research process detailing research methods how the material might be used for publication and clarifying our collaboration with Health Scotland. All those taking part who gave permission for their material to be used were asked to sign a document

giving their permission and where appropriate a release document for video content. Participants were assured that their confidentiality would be respected by rendering all written material anonymous and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time should they wish to do so.

Transcription of data

Recordings of semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussion were 'scanned' for relevant sequences and themes identified by the community researchers and wider research group. These portions of data were then analysed more thoroughly and transcriptions of salient sections were made.

Research Findings and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six men and five interviews were finally used in the study. All the men interviewed were unemployed and in receipt of various forms of government benefits. Initial analysis was undertaken by the men's research team who carefully listened to the recordings of the semi-structured interviews identifying commonalities, themes, convergences and divergences in the experience of participants. Initial findings were then shared with the wider research team and scrutinised under further discussion. In this way a number of themes were identified across the interviews and other seemingly divergent positions noted. The research team used the process of analysis in part to identify themes and in part to learn from the shared experience of the group noting especially how participants address common problems in sometimes convergent and sometimes divergent ways.

Single Men Research Group

Budgeting

All the male participants were very concerned to get value for money within a limited budget. Weekly budgets for food to be prepared at home varied considerably from around £17.00 to £30 each week. Participants were also very aware of the need to get sufficient food to meet their needs and for some this led to compromises in terms of quality and freshness of food.

I only buy fresh from time to time, veg less likely as it is may go off. I try to look for what is cheap to get more for my money. Things like pies, pizza's I'm not skilled at cooking P1

I go for things that are just about going out of date. Things that are still healthy, things that are much cheaper, way cheaper. P3

I could eat a lot healthier like I've said I don't have much fruit or vegetables or that. If I had the budget I'd be more inclined to buy fruit and vegetables and things that are good for you. P1

All the single men made a careful effort to budget in order to meet other financial obligations and all seemed to display a remarkable care and attention to the purchasing of food items that would last and continue to provide meals over an extended period of time.

I think I do (make compromises) £1.50 to two to three pounds I really wouldn't go much above that. P3

As I say I go (shopping) once every three months. See if I don't go I'm not tempted to buy stuff I won't use. P2

Most participants felt that careful budgeting also meant restraining and limiting their wishes and desire for certain foodstuffs, going without as a matter of course seeing certain items as only a rare treat when money allowed.

I'll sacrifice not having that this time because I will save a bit of money. It's a little bit disappointing I really would like that. I'll not get that this time try to do without to save money elsewhere. It's a sacrifice you make. P3

Treats don't come out of my budget only if you have got a few quid left at the end of the week. P4

I just watch what I'm spending ... I've got a car to run that's my luxury. I pay with an account for my car so there is always money to pay for it. P2

Routine

For men living on their own lack of routine is often a challenge. Most participants tended to eat when they felt like it and did not conform to set times for lunch, evening meal and late supper. All the participants interviewed either never ate breakfast or frequently missed breakfast.

I never have breakfast usually. Diner, I never have diner I just eat when I'm hungry and that. I just eat when I feel like it. P1

My eating habits are chaotic. I don't eat breakfast but normally always have diner. P2

Apart from breakfast I have got no set times for meals. I just eat when I am hungry. P4

Lunch I am not so worried about. I usually have my tea at four o'clock. P5

If I was going out it would be more a meat roll or something. P3

For some this lack of routine may also reflect the reduced levels of activity and suppressed appetite experienced by those with little formal structure to their lives.

There are days when you could eat all day and never be full. Then your body adjusts and a pie and a packet of crisps will do you all day. P1

Three of the participants regularly attended community lunch groups and these can provide a degree of structure a guaranteed level of nutritionally sustaining food within a limited budget as well as social contact for men living on their own. On the other hand having had a full meal might lead to skipping another main meal later in the day.

I'm out every Wednesday, Thursday, Friday at lunch groups it helps to make it work. P2

If I've been at the lunch club I'll probably skip a meal. P1

Knowledge about food and cooking

Some participants felt they would like to eat less junk food but that they lacked the knowledge to prepare healthier meals using fresher ingredients. Fresh and whole food items were seen as difficult and troublesome to prepare as well as costly especially when cooking for one because of the issue of wastage. For other participants preparing meals from fresh and whole food ingredients became a pleasurable activity in its own right. The issue of motivation to cook when you live on your own was a major obstacle for most participants especially those who felt they lacked confidence in the kitchen.

I've tried a few courses on how to cook. Half the time I eat just for survival. I've tried courses but it only really works for the time that you are together with others for support. I'm really not motivated to cook for myself. P2

You see adverts or cooking programmes but as I say I'm not a very good cook so I buy stuff just stick it in the oven and microwave. P1

Those participants who were most likely to cook using whole ingredients had been shown how to cook by a parent or older sibling and said they enjoyed cooking often reproducing the kinds of meals they had once enjoyed at home although this can be difficult given budget restrictions.

Honestly, watching my big sister, watching, learning from all the years watching my big sister cook or getting shown by father. I learned off my father cause that's what he liked. When you are single you make a batch and freeze them. P5

I can't really follow a proper recipe and make an actual dish. I watched my mother and can do basic things. I know what sort of ingredients go well. I'm confident with that. P3

When I was younger I learned from my mother. She would ask me to keep an eye on things "Keep an eye on the sausages!" ha, ha. P3

I quite like cooking myself so I put a few vegetables together. I do that now and again not all the time cause I can't afford to. P3

Isolation and the cultural significance of food.

None of the participants interviewed felt that eating on their own was depressing or that it tended to emphasise feelings of loneliness or social isolation. However, lack of routine can lead to the sense that eating is 'just survival' with no intrinsic worth or pleasure of its own.

Probably just survival. I just eat when I am hungry don't have any set mealtimes or that. You're just sitting in front of the telly and put it in your mouth, your just eating it you are not thinking about it. P1

Eating on my own does not bother me I'm happy with the one that sits in the house and eats on his own. P2

I know what you mean but I quite enjoy preparing it. The budget side sometimes gets me down. I eat with family and I eat on my own I don't let it bother me. I don't let it get me down. I like the aspect the preparing things. I know the budget plays on my mind but I actually enjoy putting things together. It's an activity; it's a comfort to me, something to do. P3

Being alone can also feel like a refuge from the judgement and concern of others and the opportunity to drop a public 'face' that everything is alright.

It's easier to cope when I am alone in the house. When I am out, to save anyone giving grief or worrying about me I have that other person, there are two of me walking about. P2

You don't want people thinking 'Oh you cannot cope' So you try to make the effort to cook. I can do it to show folk 'I'm coping there is nothing to worry about'. When I close the door it's 'sod it why should I be bothered' P2

Eating with others and especially preparing food for others was a powerful motivator when it came to at least appearing to eat well.

When I am cooking for others I make more of an effort. I'm kind of saying "I'm coping there is nothing to worry about." I wouldn't use something from a tin. I'd cook something that looks half decent to show I'm coping, there is nothing to worry about. When they are out the door it's back to tins again. P2

Most participants relished the opportunity to eat with others from time to time although such social settings could provide their own challenges. Inexpensive community lunch clubs were important to a number of participants. Lunch clubs not only provided inexpensive and nutritionally high value meals but also acted as a regular point of contact with others in an otherwise relatively featureless week. A number of participants had also acted as volunteers within the clubs and these experiences formed 'highlights' in their week evoking feelings of contributing, being valued and cared for as well as providing a setting for friendships to develop and learning about food.

It gets me out the house and gets me to do other stuff. Generally I don't really care but when I'm out at the lunch group and that I'm a different person. P2

I enjoy going, there's good company, decent meals at a reasonable price. You're sitting there having a natter not just gobbling your food down. P1

The Lunch Club is good. I enjoy it mostly for the company. P1

I really enjoy them, going in and making the meal too. I know I am going to enjoy it I think to help out. P3

Eating out was a very rare and mostly unobtainable luxury for most of our participants. Inexpensive cafes and low cost take-away outlets offered the only possibility of eating in commercial food premises but then only for light snack type foods and never a complete meal. Although few and far between some participants may have felt that even occasional use of cafe's was a sign that they were still socially engaged.

I found some places that are reasonably priced and I go out occasionally. I like to be sociable. I go to a cafe for a snack. Not a meal. P3

I quite like to go for a coffee to be sociable I know I can't afford to do that all the time. I take the internet and do my job search or something. I don't get down about it it's a comfort thing.

P3

The participants all reported that most commercial cafe's and restaurants including take-away outlets were generally beyond their means. All of our participants remarked that they would have to plan at considerable length to be able to afford to eat socially with others in café's, pubs or street food outlets. This was a very real and limiting factor in excluding participants from opportunities for social exchange and the subject of a degree of bitter sweet humour.

Every three or four month. To buy fish and chips from a fish shop is quite expensive even a portion of chips. P5

Occasionally, but not very often. Greggs, Greggs, the style of diet of Scottish folk like ha ha.

P4

A full meal like that would be once a month if that. I quite readily get a roll and a coffee P3

I was on a date a few weeks ago and the actual date we went to McDonald's ha ha. Quality foods for a quality lady ha ha. P4

Diet and shopping

It would be difficult to make any clear statement regarding the nutritional quality of participant's diets. Most participants felt that they could make considerable improvements to their diet especially by cooking with fresher ingredients. All participants felt it was a challenge to make ends meet shopping on a severely limited budget and that this led them to accept certain compromises in the quality and nutritional value of their diet. The excerpts below suggest that super market marketing strategies including own brand products, multi-buys and end of date product reductions may also play a major role in shaping shopping habits for those on low incomes.

I feel perhaps I do have to compromise on quality some of the time. It is important to use multi-buy options. I would sometimes like to buy better quality or brands and it is disappointing not being able to make some choices – it's a sacrifice you make.' P3

Probably cheap in quality, maybe half a dozen pies or square sausage because they last a while and can get a few meals out of them. I'd like to buy fruit and veg more regularly if I did buy it, it would be something. Be more like cheap brands and stuff that's out of date and that. P1

When you go for cheap products you don't need to pay attention to special offers. P2

For some it was important to try to maintain a certain standard in terms of quality of food purchased. For some participants it was important to construct their situation as 'not that bad'

I will try to buy not the cheapest but perhaps just the middle of the range. P3

Cheap own brand products you can't go wrong with them you pull back the label and you will probably find "Heinz". P2

Few participants spent a great deal on 'treats'. Items such as alcohol, cakes and chocolate were seen as occasional treats and not as everyday components of the diet.

Treats? I like coffee quiet a lot other treats not really, if they are not there I wouldn't buy them. Maybe buy them every second week crisps and things. P3

Now and again I will buy a treat if I can afford it, if I have any money left. P1

I try not to buy luxuries or I hunt around to find what I do like. P5

Somebody gave me a big bar of chocolate. I'm saving it, I'm withholding my temptation. P5

All participants were very concerned to avoid food wastage in order to maximise value for money and to ensure they had adequate amounts of food to eat. Participants addressed this problem in a variety of ways.

I don't buy too much ingredients cause it is going to go off. I mix it up canned fresh frozen, healthy enough. I'd hardly ever portion it up and freeze it for later. I buy just enough ingredients so it's not going to go off. Just enough to last two or three days. P3

It's all tinned – meatballs, spaghetti, it's got to be out of a tin. With a tin you've got one portion sort of thing. If I buy fresh stuff it might be walking about the table in a couple of days – so I stick to the tins instead. I like my fruit and veg but if you can't eat it you have to chuck it out. You don't have to eat the same meal for two to three days in a row. P2

I buy things like pies pizzas and sausage rolls and that, stick them in the freezer and pull them out when I need it. P1

Some of the participants displayed a high degree of ingenuity and cooking 'know how' by exploiting special offers and cooking in bulk whilst adding their own 'wee twist' to make meals more interesting and tasty. In this way they were able to cope with a 'glut' of value ingredients by cooking for future meals that were to be frozen. P4 below seems excessively self-deprecating. It may not be up to Gordon Ramsay's standard but could the famous chef do any better on a similar budget?

I still like to buy mince, stews to freeze if I want them, but they are made with my hands. I might make stew and mince in one day and have some one day, the other the next. Same with casseroles and freeze them. P5

I often cook bulk stuff so I can put stuff in the freezer say if I see mince or something. I'll get the mince and cook four or five portions. My freezer is full of basic stuff, onions, peas, carrots, tatties, frozen tatties. I just put a wee twist in it. I never eat canned food, beans chopped tomatoes that's the only stuff. My daughter eats the same crap as me ha ha. I say 'crap' but it's no crap. It's no Gordon Ramsay. P4

Discussion: single men

The men used diverse strategies in order to purchase adequate food. Inevitably choices were limited and in many ways shaped by the marketing and stocking policies of the major

supermarkets forcing men to purchase own brands, special offers and soon to be out of date produce. Fresh ingredients were often avoided on the grounds of being either too expensive or likely to go to waste before one person could make use of them. Participants seemed to be attempting to get by on a budget that was wholly inadequate to provide consistently nutritious meals and constantly on the verge of hunger. All the men showed remarkable ingenuity and forethought in shopping to avoid going hungry. For some this ingenuity was allied with considerable skill and flare for cooking that enabled them to make the most of what was available and capitalise on good buys when these were available. This latter group had learned these skills from parents and older siblings and cooking served as a daily connection with a lost home life. For some it was a constant struggle to remain enthusiastic about food and cooking with meals reduced to simply a necessity for survival. All participants experienced a decay in routine as mealtimes become less significant when these are not shared. Single men on benefits are further excluded from the social rituals of food by being priced out of all but the most inexpensive of café and street food. Local lunch clubs provided a highly prized opportunity to mix socially and a chance to eat a good and filling meal made with fresh ingredients for a price that did not upset the weekly budget. For some participants these might be the only source of fresh food consumed in a week and a vital part of maintaining a healthier diet. It was however the social experience that was most valued.

All the single men accepted that they had to manage their desire for food whilst also experiencing low motivation to cook and a reduced appetite. Despite these emotional difficulties most participants were keen to point out that they had their own way of coping and were at pains to present a capable 'front' to the world as one of the participants says above '...I can do it to show folk "I'm coping there is nothing to worry about".' Those men who retained a food culture tradition from an earlier home life seemed be most positive about their diet and ability to cook and eat well. In addition these men seemed to retain a social connection with the world of food that was not exclusively defined by a choice of supermarket budget foods but was rather a living connection with loved ones, family memories, an ethic of mutual care and pleasure in food and cooking that had been learned in childhood.

Mothers Focus Group

The mother's focus group discussions adapted the questions relating to budget, meal preparation, shopping habits and mealtime routines that were used with the single men. The focus group discussions were filmed and the recording formed the basis of later analysis in discussion with the full team of community researchers. A number of themes were identified.

Duty towards family and self

All of the mothers expressed a concern to provide healthy and nutritionally adequate meals for their children and partners. Participants also seemed to assume without questioning that this is a key part of their role as mothers and partners and a moral and ethical responsibility which is largely theirs alone.

It's all about feeding your family and wanting the best for them.

Inevitably working with a limited household budget means that financial pressures constrain and limit what is practically possible and mothers will often choose to go without in order to ensure that children and partner have adequate and nutritious meals.

It's no just food they need, they need good food to grow. Sometimes you have to sacrifice things for yourself to have good meals so they are getting what they need.

This can sometimes mean mothers choosing to miss a meal themselves due to the weight of responsibility as partners and carers or simply to ensure that limited food resources go round other members of the family

I'll miss meals loads of times because I'll get their teas and bathed and all that. Not because there isn't food to eat.

I've had that (Missing meals), I found myself in that situation when I was with X cause it depends on your circumstances.

I never make enough and even when I put extras in I still don't have enough.

For us, because we have got big families we don't really get much waste. The main thing is not having enough.

Mothers identified clearly with the duty to place concern for partners and children's welfare before their own needs, health and enjoyment of meal times.

When I'm on my own I'll make chicken nuggets and chips or ravioli on toast but when he's there I'll make a proper meal.

It's about convenience. I think we all want to get the best for our kids and we sometimes want to get them a nice healthy meal and sometimes that's the best way to do it. It's like 'hide the veg in it' cause kids are fussy. When you are just on your own you don't care so much about healthy food.

The Mum's felt a deep sense of responsibility for the needs and health of partners and children and went to considerable lengths to ensure family members ate well using only a very limited budget. Unfortunately the challenge of maintaining the daily routine whilst attempting to retain interest in food and cooking can go unrecognised and unappreciated.

My husband put me off a few times, you'll make something and he will take a few mouthfuls and say 'I'm not really hungry' Like I'm trying to kill him, like I've done something wrong

Routine

Most of the participants felt that the daily routine of preparing family meals was tiring and boring and found it increasingly difficult to prepare varied and interesting meals. Ultimately, domestic routine and meal times have to be achievable within boundaries of time, budget and the emotional energy of mothers themselves.

I will try to keep meals for the kids breakfast lunch and tea at the same time but that does not mean I will eat at those times.

After making all the effort you can't be bothered eating it. You kind of get stuck in a rut sometimes and you think like your own ways. What's easiest for you?

The pressure of domestic responsibilities only increases as the family grows and can sometimes seem overwhelming.

It just goes to show like if you have got two kids it's different if you have got three kids it's different.

To try to make two different meals and look after a child in the house it's too much.

You can't feed yourself and feed baby at the same time, it's hard – I hate it.

Establishing and maintaining domestic meals routine was a constant challenge for most of the mum's and one that gave little pleasure although the evening meal may mark the end of the caring day for some.

I don't think I sit in the house and go 'Ah, it's four o'clock come on teatime.'

I look forward to teatime because I know after tea the kids are going to bed.

Budgeting and choices

All of the mum's who took part in the discussion were very concerned to make best use of their available domestic budget. As a consequence other domestic necessities house bills, power and rent all factor into what is then left for food shopping and choices regarding menus and meals.

Budget plays a big part in it you are budgeting for food you are budgeting for nappies, for baby milk, toilet roll, washing powder. Aye, you need all these things to survive.

Most of the mum's seemed to be aware of the nutritional benefits of using whole ingredients, avoiding processed foods and cooking from 'scratch'. However, the general consensus was that this was a more expensive way to cook especially in relation to meat products and made it difficult to feed a whole family including the cook herself. Most of the participants also felt that advice on healthy eating was confusing and often contradictory.

Like trying to eat healthy the more money it costs. You tend to go for the convenience foods cause it's cheaper. If you try to cook adequate from scratch it costs.

It costs a fortune to get enough like fresh meat so I am always left with like, a little bit. That stuff is a better meal than pasta and all that, it just costs a fortune for fresh chicken, pork and all that.

I kind of go out to a pals sometimes and they are making from scratch and I am like 'Why don't I do that?'

Something that puts me off is like you need to eat fruit and veg but if you eat too much it's bad for you blah blah! You're like I don't know what.

Expenditure on shopping seems to expand with the available budget but when more money is available this tends to be readily spent suggesting that participants are generally operating within an excessively tightly constrained budget.

I never spend near to my budget but when I have got a bit more I will spend much more.

Social Eating

Most of the mum's said they would enjoy eating in social settings; however such opportunities are in reality constrained by the practicalities of looking after children and being adequately equipped for social dining. A number of the families do not have dinner tables making meal times something of a logistical challenge and undermining the feeling of being together as a family.

It's really good for kids to learn about social eating. We get to have a wee chat and we all share our problems. It makes it a happy social situation.

We don't have a table and chairs so we feed 'X' first in his high chair and then me and 'Y' eat and he is staring at us like 'give me more give me more'.

Few of the families were able to afford meals out with any regularity. Take-away food including traditional fish and chips were also regarded as far too expensive when feeding a whole family and were at best seen only as rare treats. As with the single men inexpensive cakes and sandwiches were the only form of 'eating out' that participant's could indulge in with any regularity.

We hardly ever buy a takeaway meal but through the day we will grab something at Greggs a baguette or whatever.

Discussion: mothers group

The focus group discussions with mothers underlined the constant struggle to cope on a low budget when preparing meals each day for family and partners. All the mothers expressed a strong sense of personal responsibility and moral duty to provide adequate nutritious meals for their families. For some this meant putting their own needs after those of children and partners. In practice the pressure to budget, plan and deliver a schedule of meals each day led to feelings of tiredness, loss of interest in food and a tendency to skip meals on a regular basis. Mothers who skipped meals described feeling disinterested in food and a corresponding loss of appetite. In addition it was sometimes difficult to have enough for everyone and putting themselves last meant that some mothers failed to receive adequate portions to meet their own needs. The experience of the mothers varied widely and not everyone could relate to these feelings of having to go without food.

Most of the mothers felt they had a good grasp of the kinds of food that was nutritionally balanced and recognised that cooking 'from scratch' with fresh ingredients was best. However, financial constraints and pressure of time amidst child caring responsibilities make preparing this sort of meal very difficult and generally too expensive to be considered on a regular basis. Social eating although viewed as desirable and especially good for the children was also beyond the means of most of the mum's and only an exceptionally rare treat if that. Inexpensive street food from local bakers was purchased from time to time but this never extended to eating out in restaurants. For most mums even the more traditional take-away meals such as fish and chips or Chinese food were well beyond their reach.

Mothers regulated family mealtimes in order to manage the wider care needs of the children. This routine locked mothers into what could sometimes seem like a quite daunting and unrelenting schedule of caring and preparing meals whilst experiencing the almost constant financial uncertainty of managing food resources for the whole family on a very limited budget. Both pressures tended to devalue the experience of food preparation and eating together for a number of the mums. In addition a number of the mothers did not have dinner tables where all members of the family could eat together making meal times a struggle.

General discussion and comparison of experience.

During informal discussions held with both groups of participant researchers a number of issues came into sharper focus. Researchers pointed out that even when there is a wage earner in the home financial situations can be broadly the same as those on benefits. In addition, near neighbours and other families ostensibly living in very similar circumstances can be sufficiently better off to never experience the same 'food crisis' situations. This may be due to slightly higher incomes making a marked difference and/or the ability to access a wider support network of family and friends etc. In any event our researchers reported a constant struggle and strain to maintain adequate nutrition for themselves and their families that frequently threatened to collapse into crisis. Two of the participant researchers had accessed food aid programmes in the past but this was very much seen as a personal failure and last resort to be avoided at all costs.

Both groups of participant researchers admitted to frequently skipping meals. Amongst the groups this behaviour seems to be closely related to financial and emotional pressures. Male and female participant researchers described missing meals because they did not feel hungry or were de-motivated. In both groups the reasons for these feelings might be quite different with single men describing the loss of structure and appetite in their lives and the mum's group suggesting that exhaustion and putting others needs first were the major factors. It was also recognised that missing a meal does help to make the budget for oneself and others go further. In this way occasionally skipping a meal ekes out supplies in the store cupboard and extends the period before having to shop.

Both groups recognised that they were to a great extent excluded from social eating situations. Hosting a meal for extended family or friends would involve careful advance planning and considerable financial difficulty. As a consequence most participant researchers accepted that social eating opportunities would be limited and very infrequent.

Both groups displayed great ingenuity and creativity in creating sufficient meals with insufficient means. The means of achieving this varied widely across both groups and with varied outcomes in terms of the nutritional adequacy of the meals prepared. Both groups recognised the importance of using fresh and whole ingredients but felt that this tended to be a more expensive way of cooking and one that also was difficult given the other pressures of their lifestyle. In practical terms both groups were largely under a constant pressure to prepare sufficient quantity of meals with less than adequate resources. Recent work carried out in Northern Ireland (MacMahon & Weld 2015) suggests that weekly expenditure to provide an adequate and acceptable diet would equate with approximately with something in excess of £59 for a single person and £119 for a family of four. Both figures are far in excess of the typical budgets available to our participants. This was especially true for single men who might be in receipt of job seekers allowance of £73 per week.

There was a wide disparity in the confidence levels of the various participants in relation to cooking. Despite the fact that a number of the participants had attended cooking skills classes those who were most able to apply and adapt cooking skills to their current situation were those who had learned how to cook through their previous experience of home life cooking with parents and siblings. These participants were able to adapt the cooking culture of home to their new circumstances. In addition this connection seemed to maintain a sense of continuity with previous values of a home life maintained in their food tradition as well as a sense of being capable despite difficult circumstances. Both groups recognised the importance of social eating but had few opportunities to experience this. Inexpensive 'lunch clubs' provided an important opportunity to meet others and may also make a critical difference to the nutritional balance of the diet consumed by those participants who use them by providing fresh food fruit and vegetables that may otherwise be lacking in the diet. The emotional significance of spending time with others at lunch clubs was overwhelmingly the main reason why these sorts of gatherings were regarded as important. The management of emotion and personal needs was a feature of the experience of both male and female

participants. Coping on a low income necessitates the careful management of desires when shopping, the conscious limitation of choice and the denial of personal needs on an almost daily basis. Eating can become reduced to something that is merely “...for survival” or as a means of ‘refuelling’ especially when this is dissociated from a family tradition of shared meals and social eating.

Recommendations: what happens next?

Discussions with participant researchers identified a number of recommendations arising from the research.

1. We should work together to create access to affordable, convenient and healthy food.

It is clear that many participants simply did not have sufficient financial resources to be able to make consistently healthy choices. The research team feel that work should be undertaken on the development of low-cost and locally accessible sources of fresh produce. A major part of the challenge of cooking on a low budget is related to the need to source various ingredients that amount to a complete meal. When buying whole and fresh ingredients this can be confusing, time consuming and expensive and these factors may in part account for the popularity of less nutritious processed food options. The research team felt that a low cost fresh food initiative might work well if supported by pre-portioned ingredient with recipe and meal ideas similar to recent commercial ventures delivering complete set meal ingredients to be cooked at home such as that operated by German company ‘HelloFresh’. The unit cost per meal would have to be considerably lower than those of commercial home-cook meal delivery services and practical within the cooking skill level and kitchen facilities of most people in the community. A local initiative might buy and portion fresh produce to be packed with recipe cards for home distribution. This could also be supported by local training ‘cook-offs’ using pack recipe ideas.

2. We should build on a local culture of cooking and healthy eating

A number of the participants who seemed to cope best on a low budget were those who were able to draw on memories and skills learned in the home. In this way the home food culture of making ‘from scratch’ with available ingredients served to empower cooks to do their own

thing in their own way freed from what one researcher called ‘the fear of the recipe’. Healthy eating advice, ‘foodie’ trends and marketing pressures may conspire to undermine confidence in more traditional cooking cultures that have been passed down the generations and which provide a more resilient, flexible and sustainable response to shortage. This approach moves beyond the idea of offering occasional training programmes to one of increasing opportunities for learning by doing and sharing with others as a feature of community life. Food workers should recognise and value local traditions of food preparation and promote this in ways that support the use of healthy ingredients and cooking methods that foster skills in combining readily available and inexpensive foodstuffs. More importantly, the context should build on sharing skills, traditional knowledge and learning by working together.

3. We should increase opportunities to cook and eat together as members of a caring and mutually supportive community

There are too few opportunities for individuals and families coping on a low budget to come together to enjoy eating and socialising through sharing a meal. Most of our participants were to a great extent excluded from the social rituals of eating due to the cost of dining in restaurants or of hosting a meal for others. For some the opportunity to attend community lunch clubs performed a vital service in this regard. But these sorts of services are not suitable for all and in particular there seems to be a lack of acceptable low cost social dining experiences for families with small children. We should explore creative ways of hosting family meals both within the community and within households.

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Appendix 1

Food Security Research Interview Schedule Single Men

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the food security research project. We are interested in finding out about the challenges facing single men in relation to eating healthily and how they feel about cooking and eating more generally.

Budget

How much do you have to spend on food each week?

Is this enough or do you sometimes feel short of money for food?

Do you feel you have to make compromises in the food you buy, buy poorer quality food or simply buy less than you need?

Shopping

Where do you shop?

Do you shop for the week the month the day?

Can you afford the things you want/like.

Tell me about the things you buy. What sort of choices do you make when shopping and why?

Do you look for special offers, cheap deals, own brands etc.?

What do you do with your shopping: e.g. eat right away, freeze some, portion things up for the week/month?

Cooking

Do you cook?

Can you cook at home? Do you feel competent cooking/ know how to cook?

What sort of things influence what you cook e.g. time, easy meals, special recipes etc?

Emotions and Feelings

Can you tell us what it feels like to eat on your own?

Does eating on your own make you feel more isolated / alone with your thoughts /

Do you feel you are simply eating for survival and not for pleasure?

Is this the way you want things to be?

Your eating week

Where do you eat e.g. home, cafe, friend's house, lunch clubs etc?

Do you ever skip a meal? If so why do you do this? E.g. budget, ate elsewhere etc.

How often do you share a meal with others? When and where?

Treats luxuries and other necessities

Do you ever choose special treats/luxuries to eat? What sorts of things? How often?

Do other treats or luxuries mean that you have to cut down on / buy poorer quality food e.g.

Sky TV, doing things with friends, buying alcohol/cigarettes, going out etc.

Health

Do you feel your diet supports or tends to undermine your health?

Do you have a healthy diet?

Would you like to have a healthy diet and what would that diet be like if you could?

Does your health mean that you have to or should be more careful about what you eat?

Final questions

Do you have anything more you would like to say? Do you have any questions for us?

Thank you for taking part in this research.