



Dignity in Practice



Dignity in community meals



Executive summary

The Scottish Government has committed to ending the need for food banks. This is a policy grounded in human rights: it sets a vision for Scotland to be a place where the right to food is protected. That means everyone lives in a food environment where they can afford, access and enjoy the food that keeps them well, rather than rely on food aid/charity. A Cash-First approach has been invoked to achieve this vision. It focusses on making sure that:

“

“Everyone has a sufficient and secure income to be able to access food that meets their needs and requirements. Where help to access food is required, this is provided in a way that maximises dignity and reduces future need.” *

”

The Cash-First approach requires a food environment where people can find and enjoy the food that keeps them well. Post COVID, more community organisations are putting on meals in neighbourhoods across Scotland. Whilst the practice of sharing a meal with your community is not new, many meals are now seen as part of a cost of living and social isolation response. The *Cash-First: Towards Ending the Need for Food Banks* in Scotland plan identifies community food organisations as having “a clear role to play in promoting wellbeing and providing person-centred support to people experiencing food insecurity, including vital social contact.” It commits to funding these organisations to support their response to food insecurity via the £10 million Investing in Communities Fund (ICF).

This programme of work set out to understand more about how community meals are becoming part of a response to food insecurity in Scotland.

We worked with 7 organisations that ran different community meals across Scotland. Together, we co-investigated what ‘good practice’ looks like for community meals and what the main limitations of this model are, in relation to responding to food insecurity.

The main identified benefit of community meals was their unique ability to use food and meals to bring particular communities together. It was this social function that was the most shared and most appreciated across the different meals. Community meals function as crucial connectors – whether that be geographic, cultural, religious, social. They have a unique ability to build and bolster the social fabrics of the places they operate in – this ability should be held up and valued, regardless of whether they are responding to food insecurity or not.

In fact, the main identified limitation of the current approach to community meals is that they are being leaned on too much as a response to food insecurity when this is not their function, nor should it have to be. Community meals are simply not designed to be the everyday, reliable eating places that support everyone’s right to food. They are occasional, sociable meals that happen in no particular regularity across the country. The report concludes that there has, and always will be, a place for community meals – but that place shouldn’t be on the frontline of food insecurity. We won’t get to a Scotland where the right to food is protected if we rely on community meals as a food insecurity response.

* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/cash-first-towards-ending-need-food-banks-scotland/pages/3/>

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Background

Community meals are not new. The practice of sharing a meal with your community has been around for as long as societies have been. Some are part of longstanding religious and cultural practice, like *langar* in the Sikh community, others are social, like potlucks in student dorms.

What is new is the number of community meals that have been set up in Scotland for the purpose of combatting food insecurity. It is important to understand this changing, growing landscape of community meals.

Since 2016, Nourish Scotland and our partners at the Poverty Truth Community have been supporting community food initiatives across Scotland to learn about the **Dignity Principles** and understand how these can shape the ongoing response to food insecurity.

This 'Dignity in Community Meals' programme is designed to understand how community meals are becoming part of this response to food insecurity. We worked with a group of different community meal operators across Scotland to exchange important learnings and start to understand the opportunities and challenges of this particular food provision model. This report sets out the main findings of this programme.

There were **three** main aims for this programme:

- 1. Identify** the key challenges around 'community meal' provision
- 2. Strengthen** an understanding of good practice models for promoting dignity in 'community meal' provision
- 3. Support** 'community meal' initiatives to implement the Dignity Principles in practice



What we did

We worked with 7 community meals to co-investigate what ‘good practice’ looks like. Each meal was different – in terms of location, opening hours, service style and origin story. By bringing them together this programme was able to negotiate some key findings around the practice and function of community meals.

Active Communities, Renfrewshire

When: Once a month / Friday 6pm-8pm

Cost of the meal: Free

What we ate at the meal: A Burns night themed three course dinner including lentil soup, mince and tatties and cranachan.

Why was the meal set up: Active Communities began as a jogging club. They have now become a registered charity with a broad focus on health and wellbeing. They run a community hub, delivering a range of different services and activities. Their community meal project is an integral part of their “Round the Table” programme, funded by the Scottish Government’s Investing in Communities Fund.

Central & West Integration Network, Glasgow

When: Twice a week / Friday 12pm-2pm, Sunday 5pm-8pm

Cost of the meal: Free Friday lunch, Pay what you can Sunday dinner

What we ate at the meal: Two course lunch of daal, salad and rice followed by muffins.

Why was the meal set up: Central and West Integration Network (CWIN) is a charity established to support refugees, asylum seekers, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities and migrant workers in central and western Glasgow. Their community meals were set up to provide space for these communities to come together over culturally valued food.

Eats Rosyth, Fife

When: Twice a week / Thursday and Friday 5pm-7pm

Cost of the meal: Suggested £3

What we ate at the meal: Two course meal of toad in the hole with brussel sprouts followed by warm rhubarb cake for dessert.

Why was the meal set up: EATS Rosyth is a charity dedicated to enhancing community in Rosyth. They started their community meals as an activity aimed at bringing community together, making use of surplus food and connecting with the growing they are doing in the garden. The EATS Living Room cafe was set up in 2023 and is open Monday to Friday from 9am to 2pm in addition to the weekly meals.

Empty Kitchens, Full Hearts, Edinburgh

When: Once a week / Friday 12pm-2pm

Cost of the meal: Free

What we ate at the meal: Three course meal of soup, a choice of chicken stir-fry or roasted cauliflower with salads, condiments and other sides and cheesecake for dessert.

Why was the meal set up: Empty Kitchens, Full Hearts (EKFH) is a charity that was established during the COVID-19 pandemic to deliver free, nutritious meals direct to households across Edinburgh. They began their community meal to connect with their Granton community and do something that brings people together.

Grassmarket Community Project, Edinburgh

When: Once a week / Wednesday 5pm-6:30pm

Cost of the meal: Free with optional pay it forward donation

What we ate at the meal: Two course meal of lentil soup with bread followed by mince and tatties.

Why was the meal set up: The Grassmarket Community Project is a charity that was established to support individuals facing significant challenges in Edinburgh, including homelessness, mental and physical health issues and substance misuse. They started their 'Open Door Meals' to address food insecurity and social isolation.

Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust, Highlands

When: Once a week / Monday 12pm to 2pm

Cost of the meal: Free with optional donation

What we ate at the meal: Three course meal of tomato and red pepper soup, roast pork served with roast potatoes and vegetables, and lemon meringue pie.

Why was the meal set up: Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust (KoSDT) was established in 2011 to serve the districts of Ardgay and Creich in East Sutherland. The aim of the Trust is to ensure that long-term, sustainable benefits are achieved throughout the community and the Kyle of Sutherland area. They started their Community Food Stop meal in 2016 to make nutritious food available to all in the community and provide a meeting space in the local area.

Letham4All, Perth

When: Once a month / Sunday 12pm to 2pm

Cost of the meal: Free

What we ate at the meal: Three course meal of lentil soup, Spaghetti Bolognese and fruit or yogurt.

Why was the meal set up: Letham4All is a charity that has set up 'The Hub' space in Letham as a central community space that provides social, recreational and supports needs for local residents. They operate a low-cost cafe and a community fridge 7 days a week. The monthly meal was setup to mimic a Sunday special-occasion sit-down meal with the community and to share updates of what goes on in the community.



Two work streams: focus groups and peer visits

There were two work streams for this programme. The first was focus groups designed to dive deeper into three aspects of community meals. The second was exchange visits where community meal operators would visit and review other meals in the group. Focus groups helped get a better sense of how community meals are designed behind the scenes. Peer visits were valuable to experience what it was like to be at another meal.

→ Focus groups

During an open discussion with the group, we asked:

“What aspects of your community meal operations do you want to explore further?”

The group reached consensus on three discussion topics for the focus groups:

1. Payment and financial model
2. Menu and sourcing
3. Customers and the dining experience

→ Exchange visits

These deep dives were complemented by exchange visits that took place throughout the programme. The visits were about the community meals visiting and learning from each other. The group attended each other's meals – seeing, tasting and getting a feel for how other community meals operate across Scotland.

A host feedback form was completed for visitors to share their observations and reflect on the Five Dignity Principles at the host community meal. The project team conducted visits to each of the seven organisations, and provided detailed feedback for each visit.



What we learned

There were key lessons that emerged from both the focus groups and exchange visits. The main opportunity of the community meal model was their ability to create community around eating together. Frequency of the meal, making it feel like it's for everyone and creating a healthy, sustainable menu were all identified as challenges for promoting dignity.

Paying for community meals

“It just doesn't make sense to charge people to go to the meal – it couldn't really cover the cost and we also don't want to – the meal needs to be paid for but not by the person at the end – we need to find funding from elsewhere.”

Volunteer from EKFH

→ Charging at community meals

There are many different payment styles that community meals use: free, pay-what-you-feel, pay-it-forward, suggested price, priced meal.

All meals agreed that putting a 'hard price' on the meal would contradict the purpose of their meal: to be able to bring the community together over food. Almost all meals were free with some kind of optional donation scheme (pay-it-forward or pay-what-you-feel).

EATS Rosyth was the only meal with a suggested price. They have found that their low price (£3) has not prevented people from attending the meal. They opted for this model as opposed to a pay-what-you-feel or pay-it-forward approach because it standardised the cost for everyone to a level that was affordable to most of their patrons. This doesn't mean they can't be flexible when required. Their use of a bookings system means people can indicate at that contact point (over the phone or via email),

rather than at the meal, if the price is a barrier to attendance.

This system of a 'very affordably priced' meal with the option to make it free where required has worked well for EATS – especially because they operate their meal more frequently than others and therefore have more costs. This funding helps cover the cost of ingredients that they have to buy in for the meal and some of their chef's time.

→ Funding a community meal

Still, EATS, like all other meals, rely on external funding to keep going. Each community meal was funded differently. All agreed that community meals would always require external funding to keep going, especially against the need to ensure the quality of the food served.

None of the meals had one single stream of funding. Some meals relied entirely on multiple streams of external funding. For organisations with other facilities and services, the meal was funded by a combination of funding from other business areas (such as meeting room hire, gym memberships) and external funding. The operators agreed that the search and management of this funding takes a lot of time. It also impacts their ability to provide customers with the reliability that the meal will always be there.

CASE STUDY: Letham4All priced menu cafe vs free community meal

“It’s busier, it makes some money to put back into the cafe and for me, it feels more dignified.”

Letham4All started their approach to food provision with a free community meal and community fridge. For the past year they have been trialling a cafe serving a low-cost menu alongside their regular free community meal. The cafe is open 7 days a week and has become popular within the neighbourhood. They are considering a transition to a full cafe model (i.e. without the meal). When comparing the free monthly meal to the priced menu, their reflection was that the low-priced menu hasn’t stopped regulars from “enjoying their dinner and connecting with others.” For them, transitioning to a cafe wouldn’t mean leaving behind the ‘communal’ element of dining – people can meet each other on their own terms and there would still be the opportunity to do themed lunch and dinner events that feel more communal.

“We are finding that most people are willing to pay £2-£3 for their lunch and we are still able to provide discretionary free meals where needed.”

The cafe doesn’t fund itself, not yet. The low price of food (always under £5) helps with some overhead costs, and it has been able to cover some operation costs with sales from soft drinks and juice. However, if the cafe wanted to put on a “better, locally sourced, cooked menu” it would need to find more funding or divert more funds from other business sales areas (room hires, gym memberships) to the cafe.

→ The dining experience at community meals

All community meals were more than just a meal. They are striving to create a social space in the neighbourhood. There was consensus that the meals were trying to mimic a ‘home away from home’ feeling where people could be as comfortable as they would in a ‘living room.’

All of the meals were advertised as open to everyone. There is no need to ‘prove’ a particular eligibility to attend. Some require a booking to be made, but this is often still flexible. Others operate on a walk-in basis. While all meals were open to everyone, most had a particular community of interest, whether that be geographical, cultural, age-related, or a mixture of both.

CWIN, for example, has a remit to support refugees and migrants settle and thrive in central and west Glasgow. Their community meal is part of this remit – it focusses on bringing this community together over food. The Friday lunch happens right after language classes in the same space. It’s not ‘targeted’ at this group but does create a very specific, safe space for people going through the asylum process to eat and, if they want to, get in the kitchen and cook the foods they want to.

Another common thread for the meals was a particular focus on supporting those that are struggling with the cost of living. For some, it was an explicit aim for the meal to be attended by people experiencing food insecurity. Grassmarket Community

Project, for example, had a particular focus on reaching those experiencing homelessness in Edinburgh. For others, this happened more ‘naturally’ with their meal becoming known as a cost-of-living support mechanism for the neighbourhoods they are located in.

Most community meals used to operate a food bank or still operate a food pantry – all agreed that the community meal is the part of their operation that feels the most open to everyone in their neighbourhoods. Active Communities, for example, said their community meal enabled people to ‘socialise’ over food as opposed to ‘present as experiencing food insecurity.’ Still, some are finding that it can be difficult to make the meal feel like ‘it’s a place that everyone would want to eat.’ Some people we spoke to at the meals felt that there is some stigma around attending a community meal because they are increasingly becoming associated with food charity/aid as opposed to a social space to eat together.

“I broke my leg so come here for the exercise classes. I heard about the meal and have now started coming to it.”

Attendee at Active Communities meal

→ Regularity of community meals

“We visited the meal in Grassmarket last night and told the woman we were sitting with that there was another meal on the next night in Rosyth. She came all the way to Rosyth or the meal the following night. I know a lot of people that travel to be able to go to different community meals throughout the week.”



Mapping community meals across Scotland

Throughout the programme we attempted to pull together a list of community meals in operation across Scotland. We found that getting an exhaustive list would be incredibly difficult because: 1) there are too many meals; 2) lots can be irregular and 3) the meals aren't always advertised beyond word of mouth. We instead aimed for a list that had good geographic spread and a variety of different models. There have been many similar efforts to map meals in certain areas – Grassmarket Community Project, for example, has put together a map for Edinburgh.

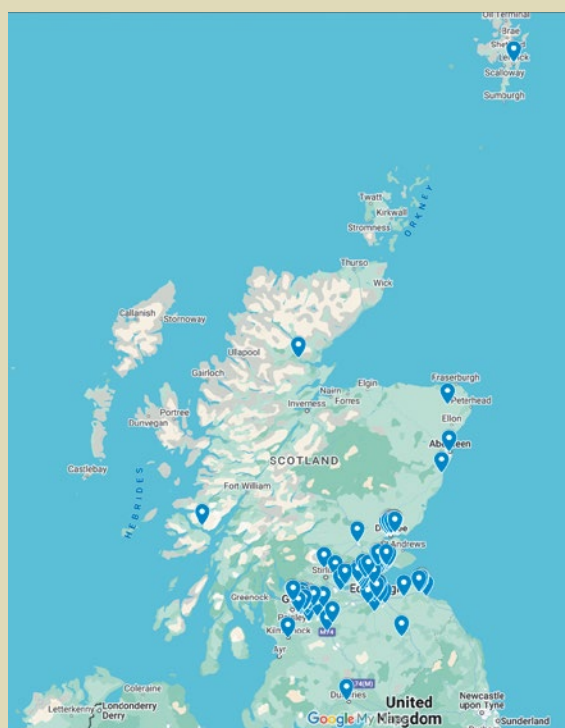
This mapping showed that regularity is a problem. Community meals are not everyday operations. Most do not operate on evenings, and even less operate on a weekend. Some areas of Scotland have far more community meals than others. Still, there is no area where community meals are 'regular' enough to be reliable eating places. Of the 200 meals we mapped, the average opening hours were under six hours a week. Most meals operate just 2 services a week.

This mapping exercise is corroborated by the recent study conducted by the Diffley Partnership on behalf of Edinburgh's Cash-First programme. Out of the 99 food services it studied, 'community meal' was the largest category: 39 services were community meal services (compared with 21 food banks, 26 food pantries and 13 food box/parcel providers). Nonetheless, the study found that regularity was still a problem for these operations. It highlighted that there were little to no weekend meal services of community meals (just 4 of the meals operated on a Saturday or a Sunday – no meal operated both).

There was expressed concern from the organisations we worked with about this lack of regularity:

“One organisation explained how they had provided food provision on a Saturday in the past but this was too challenging to continue due to staffing shortages and they ceased that provision. Other providers were open about the ongoing planning needed to operate services within their available resources, but restricting opening times can create barriers to access.”

Figure 1. Mapping community meals across Scotland (note: this is not an exhaustive list)



Some of the meals in the group operated once a week, others operated once a month. The most frequent meal was twice a week. All meals agreed that there was never a struggle to get people along to the meals – most were full at every seating.

“There is clearly a demand for eating out in the neighbourhood – but if you want to do it more than once a week, you need to be resourceful enough to search for and get to those meals that are happening.”

Volunteer and diner at EKFH

That’s easier in Edinburgh than it is in Kyle of Sutherland – there aren’t many (if any) other regular meals taking place, other than the Monday lunch that the development trust puts on.

There are dignity implications to this ‘patchwork’ of infrequent community meals. As a diner at EATS Rosyth put it, the invisible network of meals makes it feel, quite “hush hush – like you might have to ask for permission to go to one of these meals.” Having to ask around about community meals makes you feel like you need to be ‘helped’ rather than just being a regular patron of a place in the neighbourhood.

Three of the meals also operated a cafe. This, they agreed, has helped to attract more patrons from the area and is a natural way for people to find out about their community meals. As Letham4All café worker said, there is a nice feedback loop that exists between the cafe and the meal – it helps overcome the irregularity of the meal. Of course, this cafe option doesn’t make sense for all organisations. There is still, as EATS Rosyth said, “a big place for the community meal, but we get to spend a lot more time focussing on the community bit because we have this cafe that is always there for people in the neighbourhood.”

→ The menu at community meals

“We need the meals paid for – our producers, suppliers and the people involved in cooking and serving the meal – but we don’t want to pass this on to the customers at the end – everyone has a right to good food, it shouldn’t be about whether you can afford it or not.”

Volunteer at EKFH

Menu design is driven by what is supplied and what is supplied is dependent on the budget that the meals have. All meals use some form of surplus. All agree that some surplus can be good but that they don’t want to be completely reliant on it.

“We have to use some surplus and some surplus is good but if we want to put on a meal that’s been locally sourced, that’s hot, that’s got variety and that tastes delicious, we need to pay for that.”

CWIN community chef

There are different types of surplus. The main two types are from supermarkets and from farms. Surplus from supermarkets is something that all community meals want to get away from. The reasons for this are practical: this surplus is unpredictable, usually very close to expiration and often has a very low nutritional quality. As EKFH put it: “If supermarkets are giving stuff away it’s because there isn’t value on it anymore – why would we want to serve that up.”

The other reason for wanting to come away from supermarket surplus is principled. By taking this surplus, the meals felt they were allowing the supermarkets to get away with their cycle of ‘overbuying and offloading.’ It’s cheaper for supermarkets to have charities pick up their surplus food than to have to get rid of it themselves. When the meals can’t

use their products, which happens a lot due to expiration and quality, the meals are the ones that have to dispose of it.

Surplus from farms is something all community meals would like to make more use of, but still not be reliant on. Organisers agreed that surplus from farms makes more sense: gluts happen naturally, and there's no problem chopping up a wonky carrot into a pasta sauce. However, it can be more difficult to establish reliable supply relationships with farms.

All organisers agreed that they don't want to be completely reliant on surplus. From a dignity perspective, this reliance takes away

a 'sense of control'. It limits the ability for customers to feed back into what is being served at the meal – and it can limit the variety that can be put into the meal itself.

For CWINs model, being reliant on surplus simply wouldn't work. They operate a system where members of the community can opt in to do a kitchen shift and put on a meal that 'reminds them of home.' The chefs pick a dish, CWIN see what they have from surplus, but the majority of ingredients and spices come from shopping around at a combination of speciality stores. The FareShare delivery certainly doesn't cover what is needed for these dishes.

CASE STUDY: I'd pay my volunteer chef if I got more funding

It's not just that more funding could help purchase higher quality ingredients, the meals would all pay more of their volunteers. All meals rely on some free labour from their generous volunteers. Some volunteers might not want to be paid – this is what they do for themselves to be part of the community. However, the people running the meals agreed that if they had funding, paying volunteers for the work they do to put on the meal would be at the top of the list. Many organisers already pay their chefs and some pay the salary of a manager who helps out with the meal. When we asked the group:

“What would you do if funding wasn't an issue?”

All said they would pay their volunteers, especially their chefs, the rates they deserve. If community meals could pay chefs, there would be new, potentially more appealing food sector employment opportunities across the country.

Former chef turned EKFH worker said:

“There are a lot of talented chefs that would jump at the opportunity to do what they do away from the hospitality sector – where they are often overworked and not always paid well. It's a very attractive working environment, the barrier is being able to pay them.”

Reflections

It is clear that there will always be a place for community meals. It is less clear that they should be relied on as a response to food insecurity.

Community meals are best at bringing groups of people together over food. They can carve out spaces in neighbourhoods that otherwise wouldn't be there – and that function is crucial. Meals by community for community can elevate and protect identities that might otherwise find no place to land. CWIN's ability to hold space for migrants to cook and share dishes of significance is a great example of this. Their closeness to their community enabled the understanding that cooking was perhaps even more important than eating because it meant being able to continue and control a sense of identity through food. At all 7 meals we visited, it was this closeness to a sense of community that people valued. The impulse for all meal operators was that they wanted to feel like a home away from home. Whether that was expressed explicitly in the name ('Living Room') or not, there was a shared sense that what they were doing was enabling space that wasn't the private home or a paying restaurant, for people to come together.

Because of this closeness to community, community meals have been one of the first to recognise that there is a gap in our neighbourhoods: places where price is not a barrier to eating a decent meal with people. In the face of this, they are doing a lot to create and multiply social eating spaces – but relying on them to fill this gap in the food landscape is not a solution.

Community meals are not reliable, regular eating places. Operators and attendees of the meals were the first to admit this. The mapping of where and when these meals confirmed that it is difficult to eat out at a community meal more than

once a week, in the evenings or on the weekends. Another shared feature was that the meals are not places that always feel like they are open to everyone – whether that's because they have been deliberately set up for a particular geographic, cultural, social community or because they suffer from stigmatising attitudes associated with food insecurity. Together this patchwork of meals doesn't add up to a system that puts a guarantee on everyone being able to access good food.

It's also clear that **community meals shouldn't be further leaned on to deliver a right that the state has a duty to protect.** Our right to healthcare, education, transport is too important to leave entirely to the private sector or leave to charity and community to pick up. So is our right to food. Community meals are there for community but they can't be relied on for the delivery of our right to food. All of the meals we worked with shared this sentiment: they don't want people to have to rely on their charity for their fundamental human right.

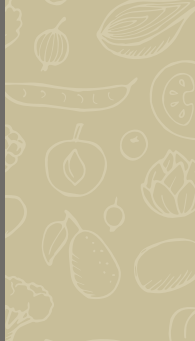
Offloading the responsibility of the right to food onto community meals only leaves less time for performing their function as social connectors and wastes more time that the State could spend robustly filling this gap in our food environment.

We can learn a lot from community meals in terms of how they have been responding to a gap in our food environment. For example, about how to put on a universally appealing menu, create a social space over food, price points that feel affordable. There are even some meals that might be primed to evolve into other state-supported, regular eating

places themselves (perhaps those like EATS and Letham4All that have already started a café open to all). Others will continue as they are, like CWIN, bringing a particular community together – their function emboldened, rather than diminished, by the coming of places that protect everyone's right to food.

These cafés are prototyping what is already a recognised right to food mechanism: the concept of state-supported restaurants. And how these can exist alongside community meals, which will continue to play an important role in strengthening communities and supporting people through difficult times by offering social connection, signposting to other services, and cash-first support.





Get in touch

We welcome your thoughts and feedback on this work!



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