

The Evolution of Dignity in Scotland's Food Security Landscape:

Findings from Nourish Scotland's Dignity in Practice Project



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Executive Summary

Funded by the Scottish Government, The Dignity in Practice (DIP) project; which is led by partnering organizations Nourish Scotland and Poverty Truth Community (PTC), has contributed to a profound transformation in how food insecurity is addressed in Scotland. Recognizing the difficulties of quantifying impact in social change projects, this report offers an independent evaluation of the DIP project's journey, influence, and contribution to food security concepts.

Developed as part of postgraduate research for the MSc Food Security at the University of Edinburgh and SRUC, the study employs a qualitative and documentary analytical approach. The report draws on stakeholder interviews, internal organizational documents, and key public policy texts to trace how dignity-based frameworks have shaped sector-wide practices and policies.

Ultimately, the study finds that the DIP project has played a pivotal role in catalyzing Scotland's transition away from traditional, charity-based food aid models toward rights-based and income-focused solutions; most notably the Cash-First approach, thereby embedding dignity its related agency values as central principles within Scottish food policy.

Background and Social Context of the Dignity Project's Journey

The Dignity in Practice project, launched by Nourish Scotland in 2016, evolved alongside more than a decade of food security work in Scotland. Following the 2015 Independent Working Group on Food Poverty, which introduced the Dignity Principles and called for systemic responses to food poverty, the Scottish Government established the Fair Food Transformation Fund to support community projects grounded in dignity.

This fund enabled Nourish Scotland to deliver the DIP project, helping community organizations embed the Dignity Principles in everyday food work. Subsequent programs such as *A Menu for Change* (2017–2019) and the national framework *Cash-First: Towards Ending the Need for Food Banks in Scotland* further advanced income-based, rights-driven approaches, with Nourish Scotland playing a key role in translating these ideas into training, tools, and advocacy. The COVID-19 pandemic marked a critical transitional period, exposing the fragility of food charity models. By 2022, with the passing of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act (shaped in part through Nourish's consultation work) dignity was firmly embedded in national policy, placing the right to food and income-based solutions at the heart of Scotland's future food system.

Research Purpose

Traditional models of food security focus on four pillars: availability, access, utilization, and stability (Sassi, 2018). However, these frameworks often overlook the role of agency; which refers to the ability of individuals to make meaningful choices about their food. Launched in 2016, the Dignity in Practice project, and its use of Dignity Principles, shows how this gap can be addressed by using dignity as a way to put agency into practice. With this in mind, the research pursued two main objectives:

- To evaluate how language surrounding the Dignity in Practice project has changed.
- To explore how these changes that have influenced the way food insecurity is understood and acted upon in the Scottish context.

Figure 1: The Five Dignity Principles (Dignity in Practice, n.d.)



Methods

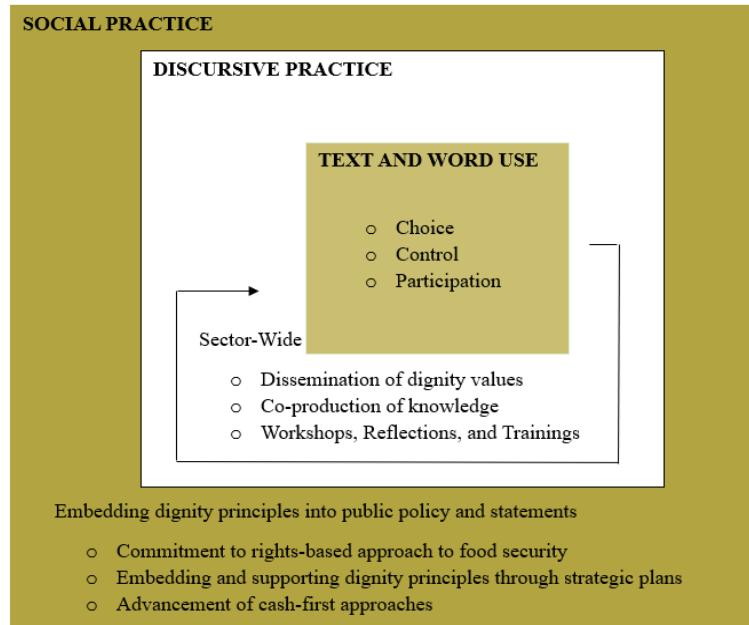
The study employed established methods of Critical Discourse Analysis to trace changes in language, values, and practices related to dignity and agency (Clapp, 2022).¹ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) shows how language can shape how people understand issues, guiding sector-wide practices, and drive public policy innovation (Fairclough, 2001, 2013; Janks, 1997). By examining patterns of words and meanings, a CDA lens helps visualize how shifts in language reflect and drive broader social and institutional transformations; as seen in Figure 2.² It should

¹ “Discourse” refers to the ways in which the use of any language (spoken or written) reflects and shapes social values.

² Figure 2 demonstrates the application of this study’s findings within the framework of Jørgensen and Phillips’ (2002) three-dimensional CDA model.

be noted that research adhered to the ethical guidelines of the University of Edinburgh and SRUC, with careful attention given to securing informed consent from all participants.

Figure 2: Mapping How the Project's Discourse Shapes Change in Scotland's Food System.



Sources and materials used throughout the study include:

- Document analysis: 21 internal documents from Nourish Scotland and the Scottish Government (2016–2025).
- 5 public reports and government texts, including: Good Food Nation (Scot) Act 2022, Good Food Nation Plan 2025, Scotland's *Cash-First: Towards Ending the Need for Food Banks in Scotland*, Scottish Response to UN Special Rapporteur Communication, and *Worrying About Money?* Scotland's cash-first referral leaflet.
- Interviews: 11 participants across Nourish's Peer Network which includes: community organizations, policymakers, and those with lived experience.

Figure 3: Making the Dignity in Practice Project Work: Collaboration Across Scotland's Food System



Key Findings

1. Community Practice Transformation

Across the sector, community food organizations have undergone a significant shift in both language and practice. The introduction of the Dignity Principles initially generated tension, particularly among long-standing emergency food providers who felt the framework implied criticism of their charitable efforts. As one participant reflected,

“There was a sense from many of the emergency food providers that they already were doing dignified work, and who were we to tell them that they weren’t?”

This discomfort, however, became an entry point for deeper reflection. Rather than prescribing a new model of food aid, the DIP project created space for organizations to question the assumptions underpinning charity-based provision. Through facilitated dialogue and shared learning, participants were encouraged to shift their focus from helping those in need to creating conditions for choice, respect, and participation. Participants explained,

“I think the thing that was really useful for us, was it wasn’t just about a particular model of service delivery. It wasn’t like, ‘you have to have a community shop or a food pantry or a community meal,’ it was about, what are the principles, what’s the underpinning ethos of how this work should happen?”

“[Through the DIP project] we were able then to work with volunteers and say, be brutally honest, you know, are we following the principles? And are we inclusive? We were able to sit down together with volunteers [in our org] and go, you know make sure that everything we’re doing was following the principles.”

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as an accelerant to change, exposing the limits of traditional charity-based food aid across the sector. Organizations engaged in the DIP project found that applying dignity-based principles helped them respond flexibly while maintaining respect and autonomy for participants. This experience marked a clear shift away from transactional charity toward participatory empowerment, as dignity became a framework for redistributing agency; positioning people not as passive recipients of food, but as individuals entitled to choice and involvement in shaping provision.

“Having these conversations created awareness... people are much more aware of what others are going through... it made organizations... and policymakers realize what’s actually happening on the ground.”

These insights laid the foundation for a broader cash-first mindset, demonstrating how dignity could operate as both a moral compass and a practical tool for reimagining food support and the right to choose. One participant explained;

“If you give people the chance to decide for themselves what they're going to spend their money on and how they're going to feed themselves and how they're going to use any support and advice that's been given, then that is more dignified than just handing over something and not giving people a choice of what they eat or what they buy.”

2. Organizational Shifts

Within Nourish Scotland and its partner networks, dignity moved from being a community-level aspiration to a sector-wide public value. The DIP project redefined co-production as an operational principle where lived experience was not only integrated into program design but used to steer organizational priorities, workshop materials, and evaluative frameworks.

Internal documents from Nourish Scotland (2016–2023) show that the Dignity in Practice project began with a focus on co-production and improving the delivery of community food initiatives. Early work centered on supporting organizations to embed dignity principles in their everyday practices; strengthening participation, respect, and choice within existing food support models.

“In the early stages of this project, we gathered view of those delivering, volunteering for and taking part in community food initiatives about the question: ‘What does Dignity mean to you?’” - Nourish Scotland and the Poverty Truth Commission, 2018, p.3.

As previously noted, COVID-19 functioned as a transitional period. Throughout 2020, Nourish Scotland’s DIP project worked to normalize cash-first and rights-based approaches to food insecurity, fostering shared understanding between local services and government institutions. Nourish Scotland reports and interviews explained how they.

“Respond(ed) to the challenges brought on by COVID-19 (as it) opened up opportunities for us to engage in events to discuss challenges of food charity models. Learning events made it clear that the dignity principles had to be part of a wider conversation on the human right to food and food-system framework to build response to food insecurity that are fully dignified and sustainable.” -Nourish Scotland, 2020, p. 9.

“Developed learning events bringing the Councils or finance services... to share how people could actually have the cash... to buy the food that they want with dignity and choice...”

As the project matured and Nourish Scotland’s ambitions expanded beyond service improvement. Dignity was gradually reframed as a measurable policy standard, aligning the

organization's work with emerging rights-based frameworks and the growing cash-first agenda. This progression marked a decisive shift in focus: from enhancing local food provision to addressing the structural conditions that sustain food insecurity.

“The policy context is also evolving. We propose a different approach next year, providing the [dignity] training to local authorities on a cost recovery model [e.g. of a cash-first approach] in partnership with IFAN” - Nourish Scotland, 2023, p. 2

3. Policy-Level Institutionalization

This reorientation reflects a broader transformation across the sector, where the work of promoting dignity became increasingly connected to rights-based approaches aimed at addressing the root causes of food insecurity.

Public documents like *Cash-First: Towards Ending the Need for Food Banks in Scotland* and *Worrying About Money?* show how the Dignity Principles have gained institutional legitimacy, influencing discussions on rights-based and cash-first approaches to addressing food insecurity. Following Nourish Scotland's post-COVID move away from food charity, these documents emphasize adequate income; not food aid, as the foundation for dignity and choice.

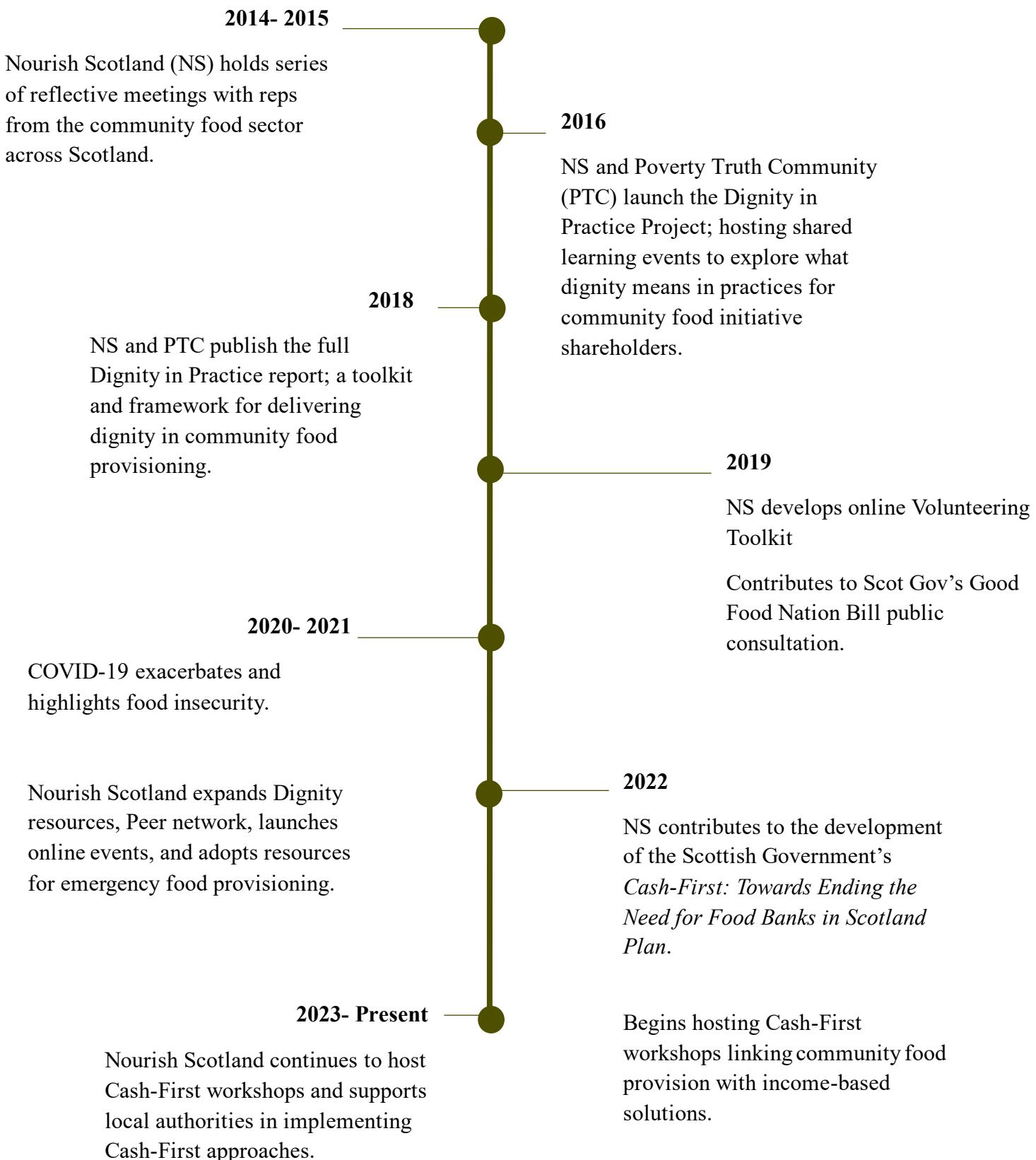
“...we will pilot the use of cash-first tools to address food insecurity in community food settings. [And provide funds to organizations that]...provide training, advice, and support to pantries within the network (of community food organizations) on how to increase access to cash-first and embed the Dignity principles.”- Scot Gov, 2023, p.14

“The aim of the [‘Worrying About Money’ project] was to reduce the need for food aid by promoting a cash first approach to tackle food insecurity.” – Biggs et al., 2021, p.5

By 2022, dignity and its correlating agency concepts had become fully and functionally embedded within Scotland's statutory frameworks and national policy narratives. The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 and the subsequent Proposed Good Food Nation Plan explicitly linked food access to human rights, requiring measurable outcomes and indicators grounded in dignity and respect. This reframing influences policy initiatives;

“To promote cash-first responses to financial hardship, reducing the need for emergency food aid in line with Cash First: Towards Ending the Need for Food Banks in Scotland, and to ensure that, where cash support is not appropriate, any direct food aid is provided in a manner that maximises dignity.”- Scot Gov, 2025, p. 58

Figure 4: Tracing the Impact: A Timeline of Nourish Scotland's Dignity Work



Implications

The findings show a major shift in how Scotland addresses food insecurity: ideas like dignity and agency have moved from being values discussed in theory to principles that now guide policy as well as everyday practice.

At the organizational level, the DIP project has shown how community food work can change from providing emergency help to building long-term participation and respect. Through peer learning, workshops, and lived-experience leadership, organizations have created more inclusive and reflective ways of working. Together, these developments mark a lasting change in how Scotland understands and responds to food insecurity; recognizing that access to food is inseparable from income, participation, and human rights.

Furthermore, by embedding the evolving concept of dignity into frameworks like the *Cash-First* approach and the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, national policy has made a decisive move away from charity-led food aid. These developments reflect how Nourish Scotland's work has helped change the way food insecurity is understood; framing it as an issue of income and rights. The challenge now for policymakers is to maintain this shift by creating ways to measure progress on dignity, participation, and agency alongside more traditional measures like access and affordability.

Recommendations

This research demonstrates that the DIP project has played a key role in defining and institutionalizing dignity within Scotland's approach to food insecurity, and has overtime guided shifts towards rights-based, income-secure systems. The findings indicate that understandings of dignity have changed over time, influenced by actors across different sectors, including community practices, organizational cultures, funding mechanisms, and government strategies. The recommendations below draw from those insights, offering practical ways to build on the progress made and ensure that dignity remains at the heart of Scotland's food future.

Implementing these actions will help secure and extend that impact; with the hope of ensuring that dignity is not just a guiding value, but a measurable reality across Scotland's food system.

Key Recommendations:

- Deepen co-production: Continue prioritizing lived experience in shaping and evaluating services, ensuring that those most affected by food insecurity have a direct say in the systems that support them.
- Sustain cash-first approaches: Secure long-term investment in income-based support as the main response to food insecurity, ensuring that financial stability, and not food charity, is the foundation of food dignity.

- Embed dignity as a measurable standard: Integrate dignity or choice indicators into public policy, funding, and practice frameworks so progress can be tracked consistently across organizations and local authorities.
- Develop shared evaluation tools: Create a common framework to measure dignity and agency outcomes across projects, building a collective evidence base that supports accountability and learning.
- Align funding and practice with rights-based values: Direct resources toward projects that explicitly promote fairness, choice, and participation.

Conclusion

The Dignity in Practice project has catalyzed a significant shift in Scotland's food security framework. Through its focus on embedding dignity, agency, and participation into community practice, organizational strategy, and national policy, the project has helped transform the response to food insecurity from one rooted in charity to one grounded in rights and prevention.

As an impact evaluation, this research demonstrates that the DIP project has delivered meaningful and lasting change. It has influenced the language of government policy, reshaped how organizations engage with communities, and inspired a culture of reflection and collaboration across the food sector. While challenges remain in fully realizing a rights-based system, the progress made shows what can be achieved when dignity is treated as a guiding principle rather than an aspiration.

The lessons emerging from this evaluation extend beyond Scotland. The DIP approach provides a transferable model for other contexts seeking to align food security work with values of dignity, agency, and choice. In showing how sustained advocacy, collaboration, and lived experience can drive structural change, the project stands as evidence of what can be achieved through a collective commitment to ending food insecurity in a fair and dignified way.

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