



An Appreciative Inquiry into what food support at its best looks like in Lewisham



August 2021

Executive Summary

In February 2021 Lewisham Local invited projects engaged with the Lewisham Covid Food Network to join a participative piece of action research to help identify what food support at its best looks like in Lewisham. The Inquiry's purpose was to understand what has really made a difference to users of local food aid providers through listening to and elevating the voices of people using these services who are often seldom heard. The aim was to use the learning from this inquiry to create a best practice framework for projects supporting local residents with food to help ensure Lewisham's residents get the best support possible.

Ten people from nine different projects were briefed to collect experiences. By July 2021, fourteen people from six different projects had captured experiences from 36 individuals, resulting in 50 people involved in total. This report describes the Appreciative Inquiry approach and what happens in the inquiry process, along with examples of the experiences collected, demographic data on who shared experiences and the inquiry's findings. It includes suggestions on practical ways to implement this learning and actions projects within the network alongside relevant statutory partners and funders could take to support the implementation of this learning.

Our inquiry found that what people value most when accessing our community food projects is:

- **Feeling understood and cared for;**
- **Having support available when it is needed the most, and that is easy to access;**
- **Good quality food with healthy options and food that reflects different cultural backgrounds;**
- **Being offered holistic support alongside food;**
- **Opportunities to get more involved or give back;**
- **A space to connect and share with others.**

We found that at their best, our food projects are community hubs providing great food, spaces for people to connect and additional support where needed. They offer the opportunity to have a space in which to engage with others and where people are treated with dignity and respect.

This inquiry highlights the amazing support that community food projects in Lewisham provide for people experiencing financial difficulties, and the difference this makes to people's lives. The experiences shared also highlight the negative impact poverty has on residents accessing emergency food provision. The report therefore concludes by looking at next steps and the potential for groups to build on this collaborative work undertaken in Lewisham to campaign for actions to tackle the root causes of food insecurity.

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The Approach

What is an Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry is a philosophy and an approach more than a research tool or technique. It works from an appreciative, positive and strength-based standpoint¹. Rather than starting with the problem and finding solutions to that problem, an Appreciative Inquiry uses an asset-based approach focussing on what is working well in order to learn and build from this². Working with an asset-based approach can help people and organisations become stronger by building on their strengths; what you focus on grows.

Appreciative Inquiry is a collaborative and participative approach to organisation and community development where a group of inquirers conduct the inquiry together, including deciding the focus of the inquiry³. It enables organisations and communities to look at what works together in order to build a vision for the future based on what works. This approach can generate change based on the principle that a group or organisation will grow in the direction of whatever its people focus their attention on⁴. Indeed, 'The first question is fateful'⁵. The questions asked in an Appreciative Inquiry influence the direction of change. It works by asking people to talk about their successes and what worked which in turn can increase the likelihood of generating action and involvement in the future.

The Five Steps of the Appreciative Inquiry Process

- 1. Definition:** establishing the focus and scope of the inquiry.
- 2. Discovery:** eliciting stories of the system at its best to identify 'the positive core'. This involves in depth investigation into what works based on dialogue and structured conversations.
- 3. Dream:** collecting the wisdom and imagining the future based on 'the positive core' and the community or organisation's history.

¹ A Taste of AI 2.0 , resource pack, Appreciating People, card 2

² Appreciative Inquiry uses an asset-based approach focussing on what is working well in order to learn from this.3

³ A Taste of AI 2.0 , resource pack, Appreciating People, card 2

⁴ Appreciative Inquiry Resource Pack, Scottish Social Services Council – NHS Education for Scotland 2016

⁵ A Taste of AI 2.0 , resource pack, Appreciating People

4. Design: bridges to the future based on the best of the past and the present. Groups work to use assets discovered in the second phase to design a plan and structures to create the desired future.

5. Destiny/delivery: Making it happen. Building on the dream and design stages to generate action based on individuals', organisations' and communities' commitment to the process.

Why use this approach?

Using a participatory approach involving several groups would mean that the inquiry findings would be co-created together. This would imply that any learning points identified would be more likely to inform and improve internal project planning alongside influencing external, strategic work. Additionally, groups would be upskilled in the technique to use in their own future monitoring and evaluation processes. This method also aligns with Lewisham Local's asset-based approach to community development.

The inquiry would involve speaking to people experiencing financial hardship who might be in a very difficult time of their lives. We also wanted to speak to people whose voices are seldom heard, who may be reluctant to give feedback to external partners, even anonymously. Individual projects often have a pre-established relationship with their clients, and therefore would be best placed to approach them, to create a space where people feel able to talk. This approach allows for people to choose which experience to share and gives them the space to talk and be heard. This qualitative approach would be useful to understand what support was most valued and provide more detail than feedback captured by questionnaires.

Original aims for the Appreciative Inquiry

These were the aims of the Inquiry when it was initially proposed to community food projects in Lewisham connected through the Covid Food Network:

- Listen to the experiences of people accessing food aid in Lewisham, particularly from minority groups;
- Build a picture of what an excellent service looks like from a user perspective and what support really made a difference to individuals;
- Define what dignity looks like in practice in our projects and use this to develop a best practice framework to share with others;
- Train local projects in this participative methodology to embed skills and learning within groups;
- Inform evaluation of work undertaken in Lewisham;

- Showcase project's best practice with a longer term aim of improving local food projects' service by applying the learning framework.

As an initial pilot project our intended outputs were:

- 5-10 projects collaborating in the inquiry;
- 10-15 people collecting experiences;
- 25-50 experiences collected (min 5 per project);
- 1 story analysis session;
- Key learning (the magic ingredients) identified;
- 1 report to highlight learning and how this learning can be shared;
- 1 followup feedback workshop to share learning with groups and other stakeholders.

Which groups were involved?

10 projects expressed an interest following a network meeting invitation and emails to groups. Nine projects were involved overall, eight attended briefing sessions, and below are the six projects that submitted stories (experiences).

No.	Project Name	Type of Community Food Project	Area of Lewisham Covered	Average Number of households supporting in April 2021
1	FoodCycle Lewisham	Community Meal	Based in Catford (SE6)	60
2	Legendary Community Club	Food bank and lunch programme for young people	Operates from two sites but provision borough-wide	160
3	Lewisham Food Bank	Foodbank (Trussell Trust)	Borough-wide provision through four sites	240
4	Kings Church London -The Feast	Community Meal & Delivery during Covid	Borough-wide Support. Based in SE6	141
5	Rastafari Movement UK	Food parcel delivery	Borough-wide Support (and two other boroughs)	18

6	St Peter's Brockley Food Bank	Social Supermarket	Se4 ad Brockley area	90
			TOTAL	699

[Action For Refugees In Lewisham](#), [Grove Park Emergency Food Project](#) and the [Lewington Community Food Project](#) were also involved at the start of the inquiry and integral to its development. They helped to develop the inquiry questions and focus, as well as supporting the initial stages of the story analysis.

What We Did

The focus of the inquiry

We wanted to understand what help really made a difference to the people who are accessing our projects; people who might be experiencing extreme hardship. Based on this, projects collectively defined the questions over two briefing sessions to make sure we were asking the right questions to help gather the information we needed and used language that was accessible and understandable.

The Inquiry questions

'Tell me about a time you received very good help at our food project'

We asked the following follow up questions:

- *What was important about the help you received?*
- *What difference did this help make to you?*
- *Is there anything that could make the service better? Please explain*
- *'With your experience, is there any way you would like to help the project more - is there anything you would like to share with others?'*

Knowing what difference the support made and why it was important helped frame the findings through the lens of the person sharing the experience.

We wanted to include a question about how the project could be improved, as this would help our individual projects make changes based on feedback from those using the service. We also wanted to ask how individuals might see themselves getting involved with the project and what this might look like. This question was particularly important as part of the appreciative interviewing technique, as it draws on the individual's assets and the skills and experiences they can bring to our projects.

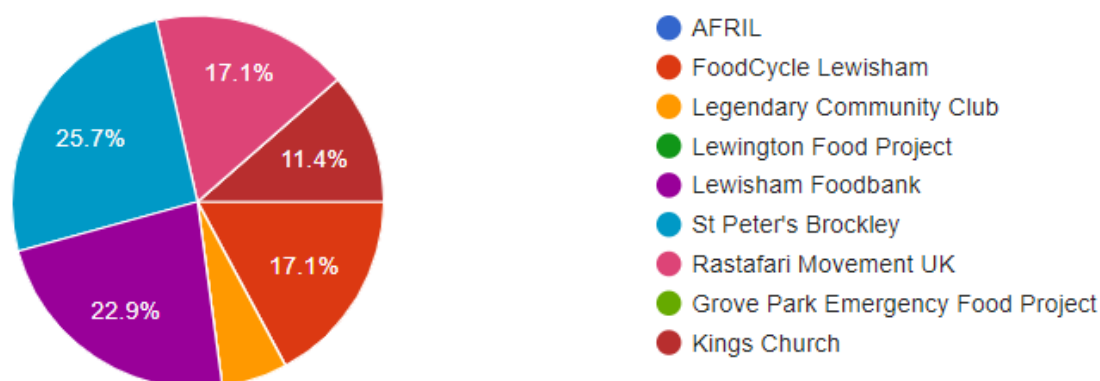
We then asked the inquirers to ask some details around the demographics of the people we had interviewed to understand who we had spoken to and what this tells us.

To help identify the key themes, the inquirers were asked to reflect on, 'What were the three key learning points from the story, the magic ingredients that made the difference?' to understand what they felt was important from the experience they heard.

What We Gathered

- Invite went out to 90 contacts from 40 groups;
- 10 groups expressed an interest to join;
- Nine groups were involved with the inquiry
- 7 groups participated in two initial briefing sessions, one in February 2021 and one in March 2021 with 3 short briefings for other projects;
- 6 projects submitted experiences. Their organisational population reach was approximately 700 households;
- 14 people collected experiences;
- 36 experiences gathered;
- 2 analysis sessions.

Our 14 story collectors collected a total of 36 stories from the inquiry. Nine from St Peter's Social Supermarket, eight from Lewisham Food Bank, six from FoodCycle Lewisham, two from Legendary Community Club, six from Rastafari Movement UK, four from Kings Church.



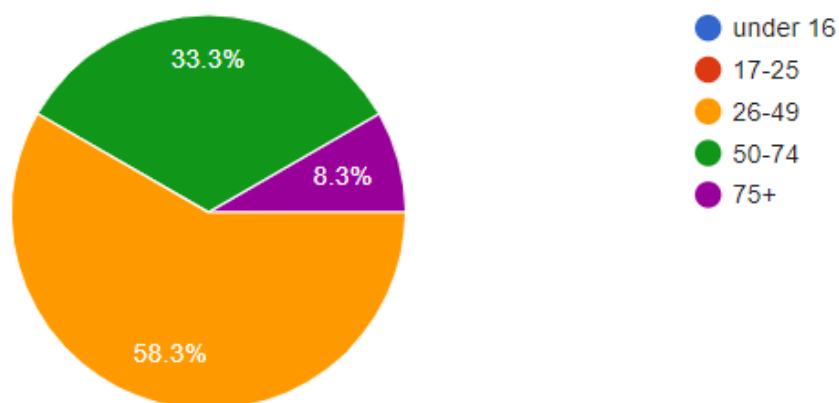
Who we spoke to

To understand who we had spoken to, we captured some basic demographic information. These questions were defined in the original inquiry briefing session, and the number of questions were reduced based on project feedback. As projects could approach anyone to be part of the inquiry, you will see that there were certain cohorts we did not speak to - for example younger adults.

The majority of the people we spoke to were between the ages of 26-49 years old.

Age group

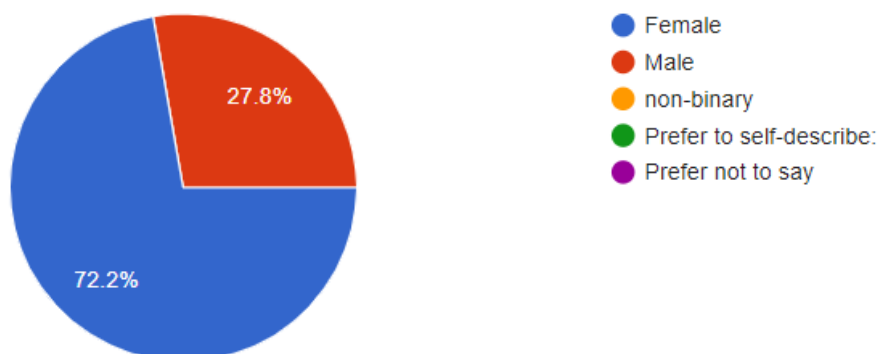
36 responses



Projects did not speak to anyone under the age of 25 for this inquiry.

Gender

36 responses

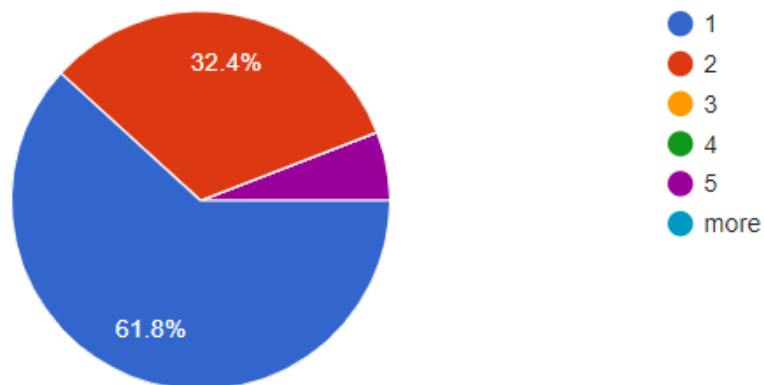


We spoke to significantly more females than males in the inquiry.

Over half of the people we spoke to lived alone, 33% lived with one other adult.

How many adults live in your household?

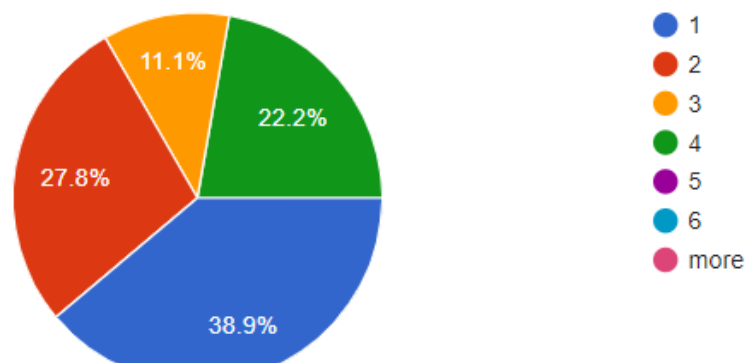
34 responses



67% of the people we spoke to said that they had children who lived with them. Out of those 67%, 39% had one child, 28% had 2 children, 11% had 3 children, and 22% had 4 children.

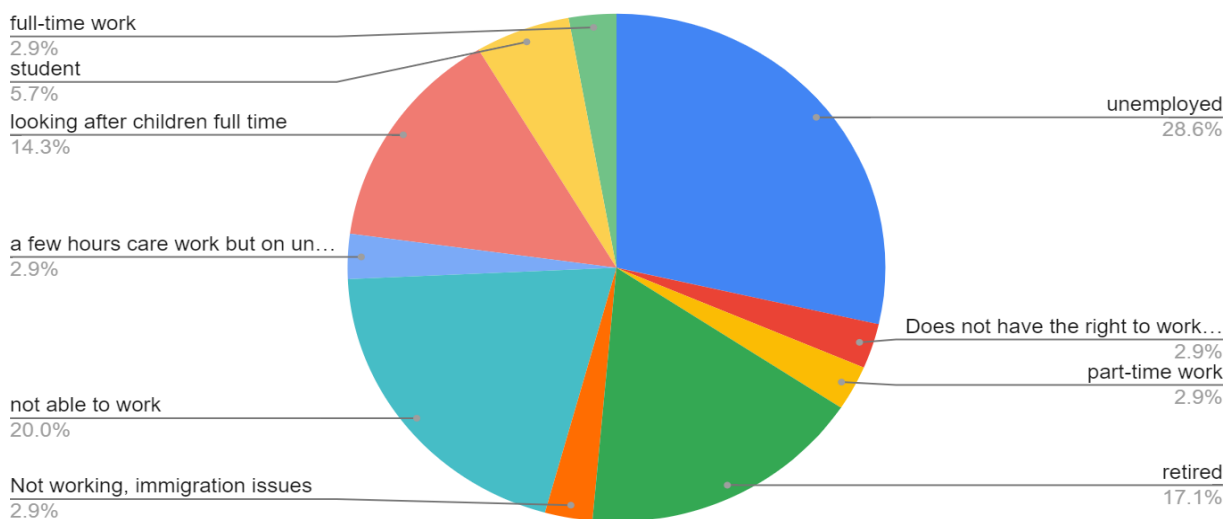
How many children live in your household?

18 responses



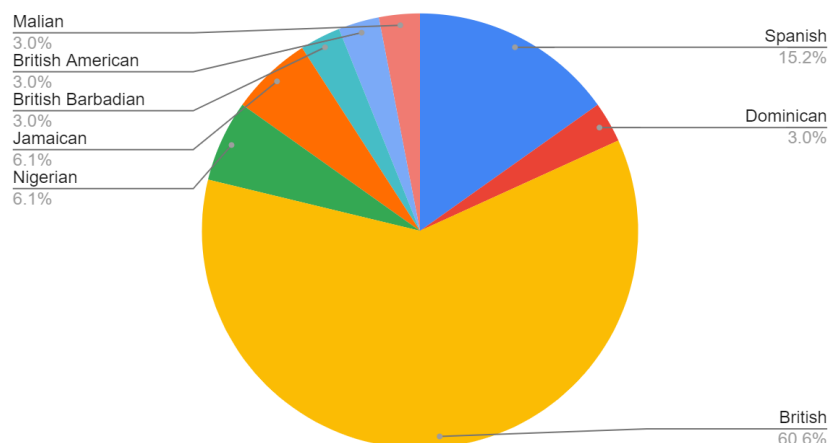
In terms of working status, the largest proportion of people we spoke to were unemployed (31%), followed by those not able to work (19%). 17% of the people we spoke to worked full-time, and 14% looked after children full time.

Working status



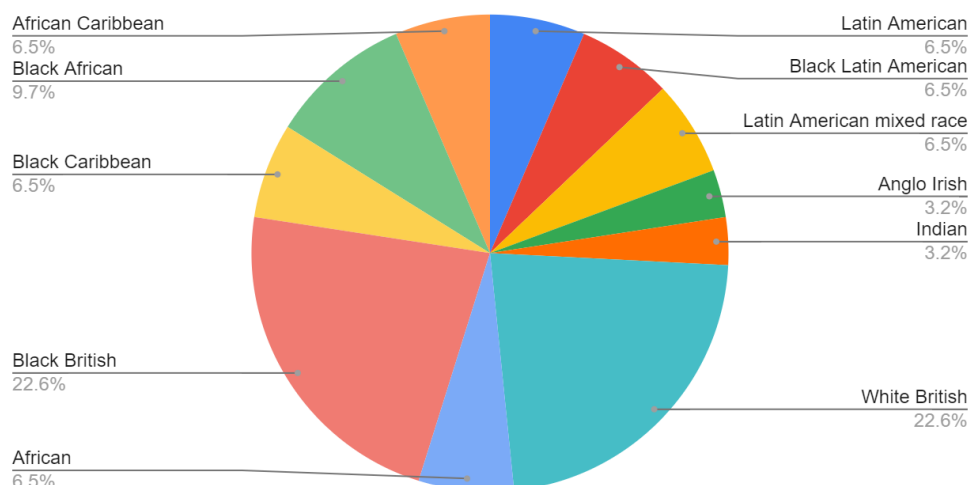
For nationality and ethnic origin, participants were given an open response to self-identify for both questions rather than a set list to tick. 60% of the people we spoke to were of British nationality with the second largest proportion being Spanish nationals. 12% of individuals we spoke to were from countries in the Caribbean, and 9% were from countries in Africa.

Nationality



Looking at ethnicity, 23% of people identified as white British, the same percentage were Black British. 20% identified as Latin American. Overall 73% of the people we spoke to were from Black, Asian, minority ethnic backgrounds.

Ethnic Origin



Seldom Heard Voices

Part of the inquiry's aim was to evaluate the experiences of people accessing food aid in Lewisham, whose voices are often seldom heard. Many might be from seldom heard communities. According to METRO's working definition for seldom heard communities, 'seldom heard' refers to individuals from communities who have a voice but are seldom heard, individuals from communities that rarely have a voice or struggle to have a voice, or those who are seldom heard because of intersectionality⁶.

The project was open to all groups and the invitation was sent out to the mailing list and discussed as part of a Covid Food Network meeting. Several groups in the inquiry specifically support seldom heard groups. Action for Refugees In Lewisham (AFRIL) supports refugees and asylum seekers; Lewisham Food Bank involved their Spanish Speaking Advice worker to talk to people who access their advice service in Spanish and the Rastafari Movement UK provides culturally relevant food to primarily (but not exclusively) Black African and Caribbean residents in Lewisham. Kings Church London has a focus on supporting people experiencing homelessness.

Looking at the demographic information, we spoke to a significant proportion of people from Black, Asian, minority ethnic backgrounds, 26 people. Just over a third of the people we spoke to were non-British nationals. We spoke to a significantly higher proportion of

⁶ This definition comes from Metro's working definition for seldom heard communities, which was used in a recent conference organised by Lewisham Council

women to men, and no under 25s. We did not capture information regarding sexuality or disability.

People were able to share their experience anonymously should they wish, to take away some of the worry of being identified. Participants were asked if they wanted to be kept informed with how the inquiry developed. Lewisham Local also offered groups a small donation as a recognition of the time projects would give with the intention of enabling groups with limited resources to get involved.

Examples of the Experiences Collected

Below is a selection of experiences gathered demonstrating the variety and different elements of what people told us was most important to them about the food support they accessed. These experiences also illustrate the difficulties experienced by people living on a very low-income and the impact this can have on people's mental and physical health.

The right help at the right time - Lewisham Foodbank

'In November last year, I had recently moved into accommodation after being homeless for a period. I was referred to the Lewisham FoodBank by the 999 Club in Deptford.

When I visited the Catford Salvation Army site, I was greeted by many welcoming and friendly faces. I spoke with x and explained my situation. At the time, I was without a kettle or microwave. Within a couple of days, x had ordered and had delivered to me both of these items.

The additional support was more than I ever could have wished for, and really gave me hope. As I had only recently moved back to the area, and it was during the pandemic, I felt very isolated and anxious. The material help that was provided to me, as well as being incredibly useful, paled in comparison to the emotional support. I felt as if I was of worth for the first time in quite a while.

The experience truly changed my life. After I settled into my new house, and got myself back on my feet, I decided that I wanted to thank those that had helped me in my time of need, so I contacted Sheena and asked if I could volunteer with the project.

In January I began volunteering and continue to until now.

Being able to give the help and support to those in a similar position to where I was has given me an enormous sense of wellbeing and, I hope, has given me the knowledge and

experience to truly understand the hardships that people are facing, and aid them in obtaining the relevant and best help that we can provide.'

It's not just about the food - Rastafari Movement UK

'It was not just about the food, it was also about the care and attention. I am not a Rastafari but my mum was. She passed away from cancer and I wanted to bring up my children with Rastafari ways of life which is really healthy. During the pandemic I missed my mum even more and when I discovered a Rastafari Food service I was so eager to get some support and guidance. It made me feel closer to my mum, I can feed my children the way my mother, their grandmother would have wanted. The food is relevant to our background, they do food like vegan cheese, non-dairy and I can ask for no tinned food. I get yams, plantain and other food from my culture. They also were able to refer me to get help with a laptop. I am studying chemistry and was struggling because my son needed the computer.'

Support during difficult times - Legendary Community Club

'I separated from my partner and things have been very difficult. Having the support from Legendary Community Club has saved me as I have 4 children and no help from their father. Even on benefits there is not enough for food after gas and electric so the food supplied is the only food I get. I would be scared without it. It's made a massive difference, as a single parent I would not be able to cope.'

She appreciated the personal touches; remembering the kids birthdays is so sweet and adding in some extras for treats. She is very grateful and wouldn't know what to do without the support. She is impressed with how we run things.

A Route out of Isolation - FoodCycle Lewisham

'I originally came because of the issue of food waste and recycling food as it's an issue that's really important to me but now it's more the community experiences which are really important to me. Eating food with other people, it's good communally - to do it together, there's a lot of people I wouldn't have met otherwise. The different types of people who come - some really rely on the food and the extra food given away at the end, they really need it, I'm luckily not in that situation but you can learn from them, which I wouldn't ordinarily unless I was at something like FoodCycle. It's given me a route out of isolation. Once you get to know people and see them every week, you look forward to it, seeing the guests and staff - everyone's really friendly and welcoming - they make you feel welcome, see them every week. It's community spirit and this gets you out of isolation.'

Supporting out of debt and building confidence - St Peter's Food Bank

'I came to the food bank after a very difficult time in my life and was very touched by how I was welcomed by everyone. I was given food every week which was a big help in my

financial situation. I have been able to pay back a lot of my debt because of the help. St. Peter's Supermarket has helped me lots. They don't just offer food; they have supported me with my mental health and always make sure I am OK. I am happier with the team because they do not judge me and are always friendly and willing to help me. It has helped me to gain a bit more confidence and has given me ways of dealing with my anxiety, which is much better now. I have been volunteering as part of the social supermarket team for many months now. I really enjoy it – it's the best day of the week for me!

Feeling connected and supported when finances were tight - Kings Church

'It was helpful to receive hot meals as well as various non-perishable items. Great to have a lot of volunteers who took the time to chat. A good community effort. This all helped because the family finances are tight.'

My children are showing interest in cooking - Rastafari Movement UK

'Rastafari Movement has helped me to feed my four children. I am a single mother and although I work full time, I don't earn a lot of money and have very little to stretch for shopping. I often go without so that my children can eat. Since getting food from RMUK I am less anxious, less stressed. My children are showing interest in cooking. They made broccoli soup, and even though they still like noodles, they add chopped sweet pepper and sweetcorn and make their food more nutritious. They have Mangoes, Banana, Papaya, Strawberries, Blueberries, and so many fruits and vegetables that, no way would I have been able to provide for them. They seem a lot happier and a bit more lively and confident. They even get to know the delivery person and look forward each week to seeing him and then to discovering what's in the bag.'

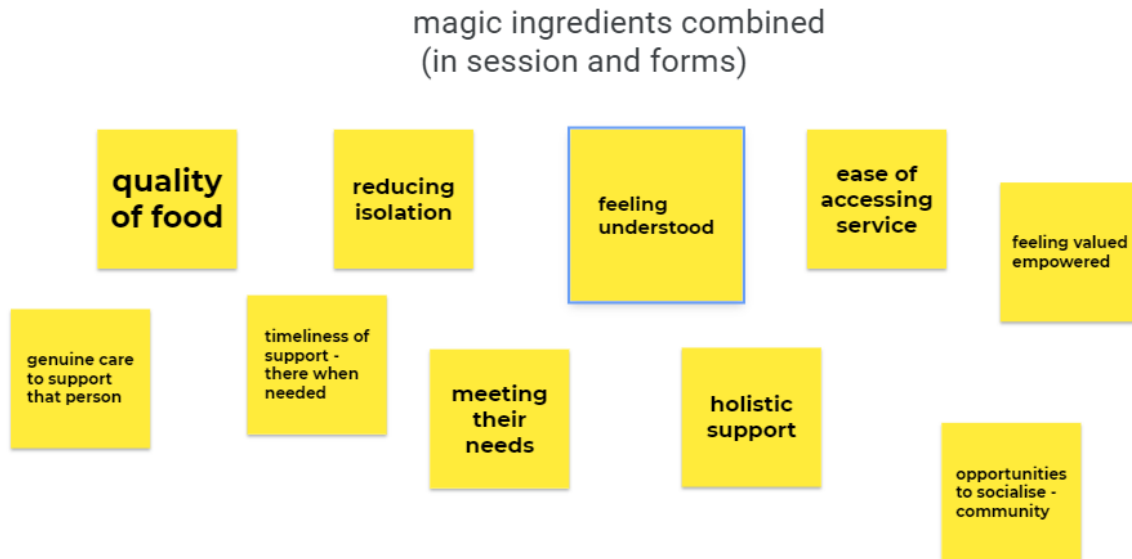
Speaking my own language - Lewisham Foodbank

'For me it was really important that there was someone who spoke my language, and that the help wasn't just for food but that you also inspired confidence in me to share with you the other difficulties I am facing, like financial problems and the problems I am facing with my husband. It was also very encouraging to have the support to access and look into other help that is available to me'

The help I received allowed me to share my struggles, because I felt that I was talking to someone who cared about my problems and the help being offered in my own language was crucial to me feeling comfortable and confident in communicating.

It made a big difference because now I know that there is other help available to me and I know I have support to go through the process of applying for them if necessary'.

Key themes from the first analysis session



1. Feeling understood

- Not feeling judged or embarrassed;
- Embraced like family;
- Called by name;
- Understanding of culture;
- Speaking the same language;
- Being approachable;
- Warm welcome;
- Feeling known;
- Feeling of belonging.

Examples: *'The fact that all the help I received was free of judgment or criticism, and that everyone was always so friendly and welcoming'*

'The help I received allowed me to share my struggles, because I felt that I was talking to someone who cared about my problems and the help being offered in my own language was crucial to me feeling comfortable and confident in communicating'

'The help I receive actually makes me feel more worthwhile. I was feeling that I was not a good enough mother, not being able to feed my children. It's not even about the pandemic, it's about not having money for food. The pandemic just put us in more of a crisis so the service was like a life saviour.'

'It made us feel worthy, it made us feel part of the community, it made us less anxious and worried about not being able to feed our boys. It helped us to manage our money and make things stretch.'

2. Timeliness of the support

- Quick response;
- Help when most needed;
- Reliability of service.

Examples: *'It was important as it was first given to me when my benefit was cut'*

'At the time I was going through a bad time, to know there is support is such a help.'

'The most important thing is that the food comes regularly every Tuesday and it really helps because my partner lost his job and we have limited income. He is trying to find another job but it's not easy because the food industry has changed so much.'

3. Holistic support offered

- Time spent to meet needs;
- Additional support offered.

Examples: *'They don't just offer food; they have supported me with my mental health and always make sure I am OK. I am happier with the team because they do not judge me and are always friendly and willing to help me.'*

'... They also were able to refer me to get help with a laptop. I am studying chemistry and was struggling because my son needed the computer.'

4. Quality and types of food

- Cultural foods;
- Fresh fruit and vegetables;
- Improvements to health.

Examples: *'My son now eats fruit and vegetables'*

'The food is relevant to our background, they do food like vegan cheese, non-dairy and I can ask for no tinned food. I get yams, plantain and other food from my culture'

'My boys look forward to Tuesdays because they are being introduced to some foods that even I had forgotten about and it's all good and healthy...'

'My children are showing interest in cooking. They made broccoli soup, and even though they still like noodles, they add chopped sweet pepper and sweetcorn and make their food more nutritious. They have had Mango, Banana, Papaya, Strawberries, blue berries, and so many fruits and vegetables that, no way, would I have been able to provide for them.'

5. Being able to give back - empowered

- Opportunities to get involved;
- Seeing the person as an asset;
- Sense of purpose;
- Using experience to improve service;
- Lived experience.

Examples: *'Being able to give the help and support to those in a similar position to where I was has given me an enormous sense of wellbeing and, I hope, has given me the knowledge and experience to truly understand the hardships that people are facing, and aid them in obtaining the relevant and best help that we can provide.'*

'They even ask me if I want to go to trips and they give a newsletter and a questionnaire to tell them if I think the service is good or bad. I think they care because they seek our opinion.'

6. Combatting isolation to improve mental health

- Improvement from difficult place to having hope - feeling more at ease;
- A place to build friendships and connections.

Examples: *'As I had only recently moved back to the area, and it was during the pandemic, I felt very isolated and anxious. The material help that was provided to me, as well as being incredibly useful, paled in comparison to the emotional support. I felt as if I was of worth for the first time in quite a while.'*

'It made us feel worthy, it made us feel part of the community, it made us less anxious and worried about not being able to feed our boys'

7. Ease of access

- Not asking too many questions;
- Lack of bureaucracy.

Examples: *'The help I received was mindful of the fact I didn't want to share much about myself and didn't push me to do so. I was very grateful for this and it inspired trust in your services.'*

After the session, the facilitator went through the magic ingredients from each story submitted via Google forms and assessed which theme these aligned to, or whether the key reflections needed another separate strand.

Second analysis session - refining our Magic Ingredients

In the second and final collective story analysis session the collectors looked at the revised list of the magic ingredients, adding new experiences, before looking at what these themes tell us is important and helpful to people. We focussed the session on thinking through how we and other groups might implement some of the points as well as condensing and refining the key themes.

Below are a couple of examples of our Jamboard which included the themes identified from the first session. We then discussed in groups how these points could be actioned or demonstrated at our projects.

How could these be implemented?

having
volunteers
who speak the
languages of
those using
the service

Building
consistent
relationships

Emphasising
listening to
people

Ask and learn
about culture
and people's
staple foods

1. Feeling understood and cared for

not feeling judged or embarrassed
Called by name
Understanding of culture
Speaking the same language
Being approachable
Feeling welcome
Feeling known
Feeling of belonging
having genuine interest in their case
Building trust by starting where people are at
Personalisation of the service
Feeling safe

This is a wordcloud of the three magic ingredients collectors listed in their reflections having listened to the experience shared, again illustrating which words and themes were significant.



How we validated our findings

After the analysis session, we took our key findings to the Covid Food Network meeting (a weekly meeting space for food projects to connect online) to share the tentative findings with other groups and see whether what we found correlates with their own experiences of what works in their respective projects. 10 people attended this meeting. We started by asking attendees the inquiry question, **‘From your own experiences and work - what support has been most helpful to people - particularly in helping them to move forward? What have people valued the most?’**

Responses included:

- *Good quality food;*
- *Dignity;*
- *Minimum forms filled in;*
- *Not stigmatised - didn't have to go to the local council or government institution - by a community group in the local area.*

Examples: *'Having the network means always someone who can help - know where to turn and who to ask to make sure those with nothing have help'*

'The issue is more than food, it's digging to find the other issues, the food is a starting point to open up and find the other issues. Many people are lonely, need someone to talk to,

mental health, clients who have No Recourse to Public Funds, can be suicidal, need someone to talk about challenges, help write letters to the Home Office, housing department, talk about family worries, space to have a cup of tea, or come to the door.'

'Cultural foods, yam and plantain - really make the world of difference, can't afford these foods which are expensive - need funding - BAME organisations often digging into our own pockets to share with others in need in our own communities.'

In Greenwich where we were delivering - people really felt cared for, 'makes us feel that you care enough to come.'

'I've got some thoughts but it might be outside the scope of this meeting. In short, it's about stakeholders working together to move clients from a negative polarity to a sustainable positive position.'

We then read through the draft findings together. Overall groups agreed that the findings correlated with what they know to work or be valued. This exercise therefore helped to validate our Appreciative Inquiry findings.

Findings - What people value most

From our findings, these are the key themes of what people told us is most helpful and valued when accessing or engaging with food projects in Lewisham:

People value:

- **Feeling understood and cared for;**
- **Support that is there when it's needed the most, and is easy to access;**
- **Good quality food with healthy choices and food that reflects different cultural backgrounds;**
- **Being offered holistic support alongside food;**
- **Opportunities to get more involved or give back;**
- **Space to connect and share with others.**

Being offered a choice of fresh, healthy foods is really important to the people that we spoke to. Good quality fresh fruit and vegetables can change a person's relationship to food, making cooking and eating a more fun and interactive experience. Those projects providing cultural foods helped enable people to connect to their culture and community. Yet what people said they valued went much further than food. At their best, our projects provide a space for social connection, a space where people can share problems and find the right support to tackle those problems. At their best, they have caring staff and volunteers who have an understanding and sensitivity to people's circumstances, cultures and additional needs. A place where people feel welcome, accepted and valued. At a time when people have been feeling very isolated, having an opportunity of regular contact with people who cared was really important to the people we spoke to.

How could projects implement this learning?

From our findings, here are some suggestions as to how these key findings could be actioned and implemented by community food providers in order to integrate these key values into our work. These suggestions came out of our analysis session and further follow up engagement at network meetings and discussions with projects. Many groups are already doing a lot of these suggestions, in which case this list can serve as a quality checklist.

Feeling understood and cared for:

- Ask and learn people's names;
- Take time to ask about people's culture and their preferred foods and reflect these where possible in the food choices provided;
- Give people a choice of food - providing alternatives to meet dietary requirements and the option to pass on or give back unwanted foods;
- Build consistent relationships between the project team and those accessing the service;
- Have volunteers on hand who are from or who speak the languages of those using the service;
- Provide a space for people to talk - where they can be listened to;
- Ask about people's circumstances and their needs - people may not always want to share but allow space and direct to other support if needed;
- Ask for feedback from people accessing the service. Implement suggestions provided.

Having support there at times when it's needed the most which is easy to access:

- Provide clear opening and closing times and be consistent with them;
- If your project applies an eligibility criteria make this clear when advertising it, including how people access the support. Be prepared to explain why there is an eligibility criteria if asked;
- Providing emergency contact information for outside of hours number for those in crisis - this could be for your project or another service when you are not available;
- Only ask for information that is necessary from people. Explain why this information is needed for those accessing your service and what is done with the information;
- Consider ways to demonstrate impact and monitor without too many questions to clients - for example, numbers of people accessing service, weight of food.

Going beyond food, offering holistic support to help move people forward:

- Regular wellbeing check-ins with families by volunteers/staff, whether face-to-face, over the phone or on the doorstep;
- Create spaces for people to share if and when they are ready, with the project team or external partners offering specialist face-to-face support;
- Provide information on where people can go for additional support depending on their need;
- Link people with support services who can provide therapeutic support for those who have or are experiencing trauma and other mental health challenges;
- Recovery programme to support people to improve mental health after the bereavements, loss and stresses of last year;
- Provide additional activities, or social opportunities for visitors in a relaxed environment;

- Link people to local cooking and growing opportunities which also provide opportunities for people to share while connecting with where food comes from.

Good quality food available with healthy choices which reflects people's cultural backgrounds:

- Regular questionnaire to find out food preferences - and phone calls/check-ins where possible to see what people used/liked/don't want to avoid waste and offer choice around dietary preferences and requirements;
- Facilitate conversations between volunteers and visitors about different cultures and foods in order to exchange ideas and learning;
- Provide cooking demonstrations and recipe cards with unusual foods or those that are donated regularly but are not as popular, including information on nutritional value;
- Training volunteers and staff on healthy eating messaging, dietary requirements and cultural foods;
- Make links with local market holders, allotments, wholesaler veg and other veg box providers to increase free or low cost supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables;
- Getting feedback on what people used or not - monitor and adapt offer based on preferences;
- Allow people to swap and return unwanted foods;
- If the budget allows it, purchase fresh vegetables and fruit which will be better quality than surplus to provide healthy, good quality options.

Having the opportunity to get more involved

- Ensure people know how to provide feedback and what mechanisms to do that are in place. Communicate what happens with feedback and what changes have happened as a result;
- Providing resources like computers, training and engagement opportunities to help people get the support they need;
- Brief volunteers and staff on what local opportunities are available and how to have these conversations;
- Provide supported volunteering opportunities for people to get involved with your project who might have additional needs or need extra support - buddy programmes, mentors, special sessions and volunteer leaders could help with this 'helping people to help';
- Provide a list with specific examples as to how people can get involved, some face-to-face and possibly virtual or telephone support to have clear examples of what 'getting involved' could look like.

Space to connect and socialise with others

- Provide a space where people can sit down, have a drink or food and exchange with others (when Covid restrictions allow it);
- Community meals are a space for socialising and building connections and community in a relaxed setting away;
- Organise social events during the year to mark particular festivals and cultural celebrations etc.;
- Invite projects to attend events and services.

Recommendations

To add to the suggestions for implementation mentioned above, here are some additional recommendations that look at how to support the implementation of the above based on discussions with partners within the network. These are organised around suggestions for the network of community food projects and recommendations for funders and strategic partners to take into consideration.

For the Network

Training

- Offer training on active listening, communication and mental health awareness for volunteers and staff members involved in food projects. This will also prepare projects to support people who are beginning to share the impact of the pandemic, now that Covid restrictions are easing;
- Offer training on cultural awareness for project volunteers and explain how this relates to dietary and food preferences in order to enable conversations around food and culture;
- Promote training opportunities available with [GCDA including Healthy Eating and Physical Activity training](#) and other providers to inform the choices of food on offer, alongside how to have conversations around healthy eating and physical activity;
- Offer training and guidance around how to conduct wellbeing checks, what to look out for and where to signpost people to for support with their mental health and wellbeing;
- Promote training available on 'dignity in emergency food provision' like '[Dignity in Practice](#)' by [Nourish Scotland](#) alongside their Dignity in Practice toolkits which also provide practical ways to ensure dignity is at the heart of community food provision;
- How to provide supported volunteering opportunities for people who are accessing services to give back;
- Organise peer-led workshops on how to facilitate and encourage involvement, co-production and reciprocity in our projects and the benefits of these approaches.

Resources and knowledge sharing

- Share and utilise the best accessible templates on: how to make wellbeing checks, capturing guest food preferences and feedback, where possible to enable comparative data between projects;
- Increase awareness of local food growing and gardening opportunities, cookery classes and community meal providers alongside more specialist support to address

client needs through mapping, leaflet distribution and face-to-face promotion at food projects;

- Using the [food citizenship framework](#) to change language from ‘consumers’ and ‘users’ to active food citizens. Promoting community hub models which are open to all residents and offer involvement and learning opportunities can instill the asset-based approach while removing stigma associated in accessing food banks. Showcase local examples of projects that take this approach to demonstrate what this looks like in practice;
- Share best practice and learning on supported volunteering and ways to involve people accessing our projects;
- Adapt the findings from this inquiry to create a local quality framework for projects providing free and low-cost food in Lewisham and ask local projects to sign up to this;
- Build a vision for the network, based on the inquiry’s findings including a joint statement of working with an aim to reduce the number of people accessing emergency food provision through providing more sustainable solutions;
- Use evidence of the difficulties people are experiencing shared in this inquiry alongside evidence within wider network to campaign for the structural changes that are needed to address the root causes of food poverty;
- Share learning from this inquiry with local, regional and national stakeholders to showcase food support at its best in Lewisham.

Funders and Strategic Partners

- Consider supporting the development of the community hub model based on this inquiry’s findings, which provide great food alongside opportunities to socialise, grow and cook food where a range of support is available to address the underlying reasons people are accessing emergency food aid;
- Support the development of project ideas and ongoing core costs of projects whose existing projects and services are demonstrating impact and success;
- Support and fund projects providing culturally specific food and meals, which reflect the cultural preferences of the people who are accessing their services
- Support is needed to fund longer-term initiatives which have a people-led focus. Funding streams which take into consideration that work to build community resilience is based on long-term change and building consistent long-term;
- While many projects are resourced by volunteers, funding is needed to pay for experienced workers in order to best support vulnerable adults and those with complex needs;
- Use learning from this inquiry to influence the development of Lewisham’s future Food Poverty Action Plan.

Challenges, gaps and areas of development

As with any collaborative project, things don't always go to plan. Other pressing activities and responsibilities get in the way, and organising the interviews was harder for many projects than first anticipated. Being a collective inquiry, we tried to keep the process and timeline as flexible as possible. The inquiry was intended to finish in April. However, due to projects requesting more time, and allowing for others to get involved, the inquiry remained open until the end of July 2021. Lewisham Local would like to keep the inquiry live after this date for groups that may wish to get involved, or contribute more experiences.

Conducting the analysis online was also a challenge. Usually, a story analysis session would be a physical exercise of making and grouping key themes and walking around the room to reflect on these and move themes as needed. Online, participants' energy and focus levels cannot be sustained in the same way. Therefore the first analysis session was shorter and a second session organised with some pre-planning and follow-up work in order to make the most of the time the group had together.

The inquiry was open to all projects who received communications from Lewisham Local as part of the Covid Food Network. The inquiry group formed based on those who accepted the invitation, and had the capacity to get involved. As a result the inquiry isn't necessarily reflective of all areas of provision, need or types of community food projects operating in Lewisham. There are projects doing incredible work that did not have the capacity to get involved with this project.

The inquiry did not capture the postcodes of people sharing experiences to map in which areas of the borough people were from. This information would have helped identify whether we spoke to people living in the areas of greatest deprivation in Lewisham. Further work could be done to establish whether existing provision covers the areas of greatest need in the borough.

Projects were free to gather experiences from any of their members or guests. This has resulted in some gaps in demographics. None of the projects spoke to younger adults under the age of 25 for example. This means their experiences and preferences were not represented. Further research to understand the experiences of younger adults to understand whether they are accessing food projects, and if so what support they appreciate. This was also raised at a network meeting. An initial step can be engaging with the Young Mayor's Team to listen to their feedback on advice on engaging with young people. We also spoke to far fewer men than women, indicating another gap to look at in the future.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Lewisham Local proposed an Appreciative Inquiry as a participatory approach to learn what support looks like at its best in Lewisham's community food projects. The inquiry, which involved nine local groups, elevates the voices and experiences of people accessing free or low-cost food provision in Lewisham. It identified key themes from the findings that defined what support at its best looks like within Lewisham's community food projects. It is not a representative sample of all the experiences, but a sample that focuses on what works well.

Lewisham Local will look at how to support partners interested in implementing the learning from these findings over the coming months, and will seek to feed the findings of this inquiry into the upcoming Food Poverty Action Plan for Lewisham.

It is important to finish this report noting that while the inquiry highlighted the amazing work of Lewisham's community food projects and how much this is valued, the experiences showed the extent to which food poverty impacts on the health and wellbeing of families. No one should be in a situation where they do not have enough money to pay for food. Structural change is needed to address the root causes of food poverty and the inequality that exists within the UK. Given Lewisham has a strong network of projects supporting people experiencing food insecurity and poverty, there is an opportunity to campaign to create this change while also working to provide the best food provision possible for our residents over the coming months.

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Credits

Thank you to all the groups and individuals who contributed to this inquiry. [Action For Refugees In Lewisham](#), [Grove Park Emergency Food Project](#) and the [Lewington Community Food Project](#), [Legendary Community Club](#), [Lewisham Food Bank](#), [Kings Church London- The Feast](#), [Rastafari Movement UK](#), [St Peter's Brockley Food Bank](#).

This report is a result of the contributions and hard work of the groups named above. The report was written by Simone Riddle, Community Engagement Lead at Lewisham Local. If you would like more information on this report, the Appreciative Inquiry approach, or would like to get involved with the inquiry contact hello@lewishamlocal.com.

Thank you to the [London Community Response Fund](#), [City Bridge Trust](#) and [Lewisham Council](#) for their financial support which enabled this work to take place.

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