

Addressing Shame as a Barrier to Advice Services for People Experiencing Food Insecurity

A Menu for Change is a three-year project that aims to reduce the need for emergency food aid in Scotland by improving access to financial advice and support when people are experiencing food insecurity and financial crises.

A key theme that has come up in both in our longitudinal research with people experiencing food insecurity and in stakeholder engagement throughout Scotland is the **significant role that shame can play as a barrier to people accessing the support that they need in a crisis.**

Our research demonstrated that being shown empathy and humanity were crucial for people's engagement with services when experiencing acute financial crises.

Not only do empathy and the promotion of dignity by services at these moments enable people to access the support they need in the short-term, they can lead to better longer-term outcomes by making people feel more confident to access support in the future. Conversely, the research suggested that some interactions with service providers can leave people facing food insecurity feeling an even greater sense of shame. Such negative experiences of services can put people off engaging in the future, thus leading to further isolation, debt and long-lasting effects on their physical and mental well-being.¹

In April 2019, one of A Menu for Change's advisory groups set out to better understand the role advice providers play in respecting and promoting dignity in response to food insecurity. They were grateful for the opportunity to partner with a local advice provider, who offered opportunities to meet with staff and volunteers, shadow advisors and observe the service during typical busy days.

In particular, as a group of people with lived experience of food insecurity, they were looking to explore issues around **accessibility** and the way that advice providers could take steps to minimise shame and embarrassment as potential barriers to support for people experiencing food insecurity.

Key themes

There are many aspects involved in ensuring people have access to financial advice and support in a crisis. While this project considered issues such as location, opening hours, method of access (i.e. online, phone, drop-in, appointment) and physical accessibility, **the group's primary aim was to explore the ways that advice providers could acknowledge and address feelings of shame and embarrassment as additional barriers to support.**

As one group member explained it: *'It's about limiting the difficulties in the journey they're going to be on... so they're not facing all these mountains and hurdles... they know where they're going, who they're going to see and what's going to happen.'*

¹ Found Wanting (2019, p 98) A Menu for Change, available at: www.menuforchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Found-Wanting-A-Menu-for-Change.pdf

The following emerged as key themes:

- Importance of a welcoming and non-judgemental approach, at every stage of the process
- Essential role of the first point of contact, especially during the reception process, to supporting continued engagement with the service
- Value of clear communication about process and next steps, so that people feel informed and supported to make decisions
- Value of regularly reviewing the service's journey through the eyes of those experiencing crisis
- Simple changes could make all the difference

Suggestions for implementation

Every advice service will be working within a specific context, so the specific ways these issues are addressed will vary. However, the following overall suggestions emerged as important ways to address accessibility barriers experienced by those facing food insecurity and related shame:

- Make people feel welcome, safe and respected
 - A friendly and non-judgemental person to welcome people at reception was seen as the highest priority.²
 - Clear signs or an easy-to-use electronic registration / check-in system
 - Promote privacy and discretion in waiting rooms / advice rooms to help people feel their concerns will be handled with respect and care
- Recognise how hard it can be to ask for help
 - Allow enough time for people to explain the whole situation (it can take time for people to gain the confidence to discuss underlying problems)
 - Offer holistic support to address related issues to avoid the person needing to repeat themselves or come back
- Offer services in locations that are...
 - Safe, comfortable and approachable to people who may be experiencing anxiety, stress and embarrassment
 - Easy to get to and use for people with little to no money
- Make sure that people leave feeling...
 - Supported and aware of all their options
 - Confident about their next steps
 - Able to come back if they need to

Summary

The way people experiencing food insecurity are treated by staff and volunteers at advice agencies can make the difference between someone accessing the support they need or continuing to endure the stress, shame and challenges to their overall well-being caused by worrying about affording enough nutritious food. Advice services have an important role to play in training and supporting all their staff and volunteers to implement non-judgemental, welcoming, respectful approaches that show empathy and respect the dignity of those experiencing food insecurity.

² The group emphasised that a welcoming face was likely to be the most effective way of addressing someone's initial anxiety and worry about seeking support. This person's role would be to: acknowledge that the person has arrived, answer initial questions and make sure they know what to expect from the process (e.g. how the queue system works, how long it is likely to take, etc).