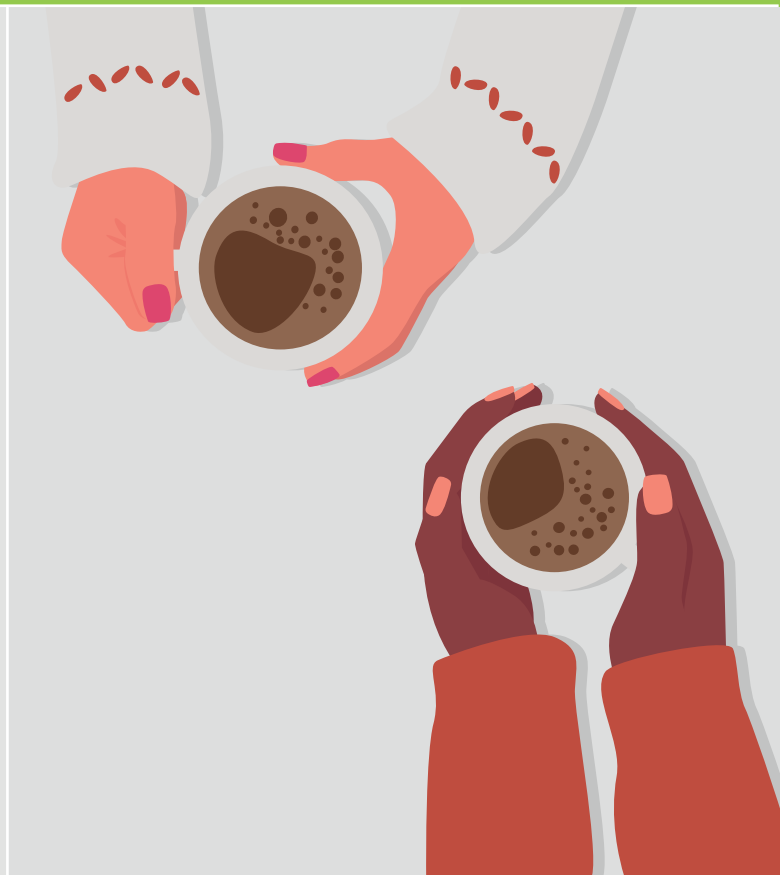


The Meeting Place Project: Learning and Guidance for Community Groups



Purpose of Report

This report has been developed with, and for, staff playing a role in the Feeding Britain West Cheshire Meeting Places pilot, and people with lived experience of attending traditional foodbank distribution sessions and Meeting Places in West Cheshire. It also captures learning to be shared with others seeking to develop community food provision.

Evaluator

Dr Holly White, University of Chester.

Acknowledgements

Taking part in an evaluation when you work for a busy charitable organisation is always a generous task. The data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many staff of partner organisations were undertaking frontline roles in adapting community food provision and advice with Cheshire West and Chester Council to meet needs across the borough. An intense dedication to developing and providing the best for people who need support during a personal and national crisis is evident in all who participated. Thank you for taking part in this evaluation and for your wider commitment and service to the borough.

Thank you to all those with lived experience of attending foodbanks and Meeting Places who shared some of their most challenging experiences and who continue to generously give their time and knowledge to the endeavour of generating ideas for the development of Community food provision locally and nationally.

Many Meeting Place partners expressed thanks to Feeding Britain for providing both the support and flexibility required to understand, reflect and meet the needs of communities across the borough.

“The pilot gave us some time to work out what was needed and respond to the need. I think we’ve got it nailed, I think we know exactly what the clients want and need.”

Feeding Britain commissioned the University of Chester to undertake this evaluation. Thank you to Feeding Britain for this opportunity to listen, learn, and support.

Contents

Executive Summary	4	Volunteers changing their behaviour to reflect principles	34
Introduction	5	Manging tensions between developing a supportive relationship and requiring foodbank vouchers	35
The Landscape of UK Food Insecurity	5	Securing sustainable funding for staff	36
Feeding Britain and the Community Food Hub Pilot	6	Manging the COVID-19 pandemic and opening safely	36
Context of West Cheshire, North West England	6	Supporting people with economic and wellbeing issues post COVID-19	37
Purposes of Community Food Hubs Pilot in West Cheshire	7	Capturing outcomes and collecting data	38
Methodology	8	Responding to a chronic crisis in a sustainable way ..	38
Report Structure	9	Utilising waste in a way that aligns with principles ..	39
Part One: Meeting Place Principles and Practice ..	10	Areas for Exploration	40
Be Welcoming	10	Further fostering of dignified practices	40
A Trusted Community Venue	12	Increasing engagement with advice offer in Meeting Places	41
Be Relational	13	Supporting local farmers	41
Provide Accessible Advice	15	Meeting Places as social enterprises	41
Focus on Wellbeing	18	Implementing Meeting Places across the borough ..	42
Promote Dignity in Practices	20	Partnering with community mental health support providers	43
Share Food	21	Developing campaigning infrastructure	45
Adapt	22	Part Four: Transferability and Setting up a Meeting Place	46
Part Two: Key Achievements	24	Transferability	46
The development of a set of principles for community food provision	24	Guidance for Setting Up a Meeting Place	47
Enabling people to access advice, specifically those who are less likely to seek advice outside community settings	25	1. Gentle opening chats in communities	47
Creation of a broad partnership-led support network ..	25	2. Visit other projects	47
Development opportunities for staff and volunteers ..	27	2. Build up an appropriate network	48
Greater engagement with the offers of community venues	27	4. Identify a trusted community venue	50
Impact on strategy development for partner organisations	27	5. Secure necessary funding	51
Part Three: Challenges and Areas for Exploration ..	32	6. Adapt continuously	51
Challenges	32	Part Five: Simple Tools to Evaluate and Monitor Progress and Impact, and Share Learning	52
Manging conflicts and different cultures in close communities	32	Sources	58
Developing a supportive relationship whilst encouraging self-reliance	33		

Executive Summary

<p>Meeting Place Principles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be Welcoming • Utilise a Trusted Community Venue • Be Relational • Provide Accessible Advice • Focus on Wellbeing • Promote Dignity in Practices • Share Food • Adapt. 	<p>Key Achievements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development of a set of principles for community food provision • Enabling people to access advice, specifically those who are less likely to seek advice outside community settings • Creation of a broad partnership-led support network • Greater engagement with the offers of community venues • Impact on strategy development for partner organisations.
<p>Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing conflicts and different cultures in close communities • Developing a supportive relationship whilst encouraging self-reliance • Support volunteers to change their behaviour to reflect principles • Securing sustainable funding for staff • Managing the COVID-19 pandemic and re-opening safely • Supporting people with economic and wellbeing issues post COVID-19 • Capturing outcomes and collecting data • Responding to a chronic crisis in a sustainable way. 	<p>Areas for Exploration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further fostering of dignified practices • Supporting local farmers • Meeting Places as social enterprises • Implementing Meeting Places across the borough • Partnering with community mental health support providers • Options for supporting rural areas • Developing campaigning infrastructure.
<p>Transferability</p> <p>Meeting Place principles that can be implemented across a broad spectrum of community food provision projects.</p> <p>Guidance for Setting up a Meeting Place</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have gentle opening chats in communities 2. Visit other projects 3. Build up an appropriate network 4. Identify a trusted community venue 5. Secure necessary funding 6. Adapt continuously. 	<p>Tools to Evaluate and Monitor Progress and Impact, and Share Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting Places Progress Reporting tool • Regular staff and volunteer meetings • The Beans on Toast group as an advisory board • Collaborative informative concise videos on each of the principles • Collaborative webinars • One-to-one conversations between people with lived experience and volunteers.

Introduction

The Landscape of UK Food Insecurity

“An estimated 8.4 million people in the UK struggle to get enough to eat. This includes many households with people in work, families with children, as well as older, disabled and BAME people. Food poverty, or household food insecurity, can be triggered by a crisis in finance or personal circumstances, but may also be a long-term experience of not being able to access or have the facilities to prepare a healthy diet.”
(Sustain, 2020).

“The top three reasons for referral to a food bank in the Trussell Trust network in 2019-20 were low income, benefit delays, and benefit changes.”
(Trussell Trust, 2020).

“As COVID-19 hit the UK, the Trussell Trust saw an immediate and sustained surge in need across its food banks. In April there was an 89% increase in the number of emergency food parcels given out compared with the same month in 2019. This unprecedented level of need came on top of year-on-year increases in the numbers of people who are unable to afford food and have been forced to use food banks as a result. In 2017 just over 1.5 million people experienced destitution, going without the essentials and locked out of the chance of building a decent and secure life. Concepting carried out by Heriot-Watt University has forecast that the economic crisis in 2020/21 will reshape this landscape, with over 670,000 additional people being swept into destitution for the rest of 2020 as they lose their jobs, income, and businesses. They forecast this will transfer into an extra 300,000 emergency food parcels likely to be distributed by food banks in the Trussell Trust network in the last quarter of 2020 – an increase of 61% compared to the previous year.”
(Thompson, Spoor, and Weal, 2020).

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, one in four adults in the United Kingdom (UK) have struggled to access food they can afford. This is likely to have left them susceptible to hunger and potential malnutrition. They are living in households with, at best, moderate food security. Half of all adults have tried to cope during the pandemic by purchasing less expensive food which they would not ordinarily choose to buy. That figure rises to nine in ten amongst people who live in households that are the least food secure and most susceptible to hunger and potential malnutrition. Nearly one in four adults looking after children have eaten less during the pandemic so they can feed the children in their household. Even the high use of various coping strategies such as (1) buying less expensive food, (2) borrowing food, (3) using food banks, (4) sending children to eat elsewhere, (5) restricting the food they eat at a relatively high rate, and (6) using free school meal vouchers has not enabled adults to become food secure and live free of hunger and potential malnutrition. These are often measures of last resort and do not compensate for an adequate household income and the availability of affordable nutritious food within their community.”
(Defeyter, Stretesky, Forsey, Mann, Henderson, Pepper, and Walters, 2020).

This report explores and evaluates a concept for community food provision to support people experiencing food insecurity, but it also recognises that the causes and harms require national policy changes. Supporting people holistically and sustainably to address their issues is challenging in the current national policy context.

Feeding Britain and the Community Food Hub Pilot

Feeding Britain is a movement with a mission to end UK hunger. It works with foodbanks, community food organisations, politicians, and corporations to support regional partnerships, build a national network for knowledge sharing, and campaign for systemic change through policy reform.

The Community Food Hubs: Piloting Two Innovative Approaches to Moving Beyond Food Crises project, hosted by Feeding Britain and funded by Big Lottery, aims to pilot innovative community food hub concepts, which will help people move beyond immediate food crises, in dignified, empowering and community-led ways. It is also concerned with exploring different approaches to helping people address the causes and wider harms of food insecurity, such as campaigning, reducing social isolation, addressing personal debt and benefit issues, and skill development.

Context of West Cheshire, North West England

West Cheshire Foodbank was established in 2012 with the goal to meet perceived temporary local food insecurity. Between April and September 2020 provided 5471 emergency food parcels, as well as support for 2271 children (a 40% increase from 2019). It currently distributes emergency food from nine venues, as well as supplying it to a broader range of community distributors. In 2016, in the context of increasing need for emergency food parcels in the borough, West Cheshire Foodbank staff and trustees explored alternative formats of emergency food support, and partnered with Citizens Advice Cheshire West to collaboratively develop the Meeting Place concept.

Following on from this, in 2017 a partnership between Healthbox CIC, West Cheshire Foodbank, Citizens Advice Cheshire West, and Cheshire West Voluntary Action established the Welcome Network, supported by a grant from Cheshire West and Chester Council. This specialist infrastructure project brings together community groups, charities, and local authority partner agencies such as schools and housing associations, in Cheshire West and Chester, to support community activities aiming to reduce food insecurity through Meeting Places and holiday food provision. Its vision is 'for all people in West Cheshire to share affordable, accessible, good quality food as part of thriving local communities.'

At the same time, in 2017 the Poverty Truth Commission emerged, with West Cheshire Foodbank leading initial conversations about the commission with Cheshire West and Chester Council, which now hosts the commission. There have been two commissions led by an equal number of business, civic leaders, and community inspirers with lived experience of poverty. The people on the commissions chose priority areas to work in and influence, one of which is food security. On 22nd October 2020, Cheshire West and Chester Council became one of the first councils in the UK to declare a borough poverty emergency. The Council committed to tackling all forms of poverty, establishing it as a core theme of the new Council plan. Since April 2020, the Poverty Truth Commission has been tasked with embedding the learning of the two commissions as a 'golden thread' throughout the Council and local area.

Purposes of Community Food Hubs Pilot in West Cheshire

"We had a gap. People used to come to us for a foodbank voucher, and at that point, we would try and offer them advice, and understandably they actually didn't really necessarily want to take that advice because they were hungry and they wanted to go and get the food, and that's totally unsurprising. But it meant that foodbank vouchers, as they stood, were sticking plasters over a problem that was much deeper and they were not solving the bigger problem. So, the gap was getting advice to the people that needed it at a point where they felt that they could accept it and in a place here they could accept it."

(Meeting Place partner, 2020).

"Food alone very rarely resolves all the problems that people are facing: there are usually multiple reasons why people don't have money. It could be that they don't have everything that they're entitled to, it could be that they are living in some chaos or facing some challenges, it could be that they've got poor mental health and for a variety of reasons people may be coming to the foodbank. So, in piloting alternatives we are seeking to actually address lots of different reasons why somebody could come for food... we're allowing that presenting issue to be a gateway to other services."

(Meeting Place partner, 2020)

An overarching aim of the Community Food Hub pilot in West Cheshire was to develop, implement and support emergency charitable community food provision in a format that moved away from repeatedly providing food packages in isolation and through a transactional process. In its place would be a programme of support for people and communities, aimed at addressing the causes and harms of food insecurity by creating lasting supportive relationships with organisations, all whilst working within the limits of welfare policy. For many staff involved in the pilot, it was a process of shaping emergency charitable food provision from a temporary and limited solution to a dignified, holistic, and sustainable approach. In short, it sought to explore the replacement of foodbank transactional food distribution sessions with Meeting Places.

Central to the Meeting Place concept is a multi-organisational partnership. For West Cheshire Foodbank and the Welcome Network, it was an opportunity to employ development officers to facilitate the creation and support of a network of partners, together with their staff and volunteers, to enable the piloting of Meeting Places. Development officers approached existing community venues and groups to introduce the concept, explore opportunities for collaboration, and support selection of community venues, whilst supporting existing foodbank distribution sessions transition into Meeting Places. Development officers were also able to explore the implementation of variants of the Meeting Place concept in other community settings, for example school information sessions and information hubs. Through exploration with communities, it was determined by Meeting Place partners that there was an adequate number of social supermarkets and the focus needed to be on providing/accessing advice in different community settings in other geographical areas, including developing Citizens Advice sessions in schools.

For Citizens Advice Cheshire West, the pilot was also an opportunity to trial offering advice outside of the organisation's office in places that are already familiar and, hopefully, comfortable, particularly for those who are less likely to access Citizens Advice support in offices. The Community Food Hub scheme funded the pilot for Citizens Advice Cheshire West advisers, West Cheshire Foodbank, and support from the Welcome Network project, as well as further funding for material requirements and training on topics such as food hygiene and mental health first aid. Initially, the grant was allocated to the area of Ellesmere Port, but in April 2019 was extended to Chester once the

decision had been made that a social supermarket would not be appropriate for the area. The pilot complimented the work of the Welcome Network project on the development of Lache Foodie Friday, with this pilot providing funding for a Citizens Advice advisor in the Meeting Place. Then, in July 2020 Feeding Britain Community Food Hub funding was used to employ a school advisor in Winsford. Development officers praised the flexibility of the budget as it allowed partners to explore the most appropriate ways to progress in different communities. As a result of the pilot, Meeting Place partners have developed an array of principles, which are used to inform several strategies in the borough, and are transferable to other geographical locations and different types of community food provision initiatives.

Four Meeting Places have been established in West Cheshire, the names and locations are as follows:

<p style="text-align: center;">Lache Foodie Friday The Venue Lache Community Centre Hawthorn Road Lache CH4 8HX</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Trinity Meeting Place Trinity Centre Whitby Road Ellesmere Port CH65 0AB</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Snack and Chat Salvation Army Community Centre Whitby Road Ellesmere Port CH65 6RS</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Wesley Meeting Place* Wesley Church Centre St John St Chester CH1 1DA</p>

*please note this Meeting Place is likely to be relocated post COVID-19 restrictions.

The other West Cheshire Foodbank distribution sessions are being developed in line with Meeting Place principles, and full details of names and locations can be found at: <https://westcheshire.foodbank.org.uk/locations/>

The Welcome Network project is also supporting local community groups beyond traditional foodbank distribution sessions to adopt the principles of Meeting Places. Local community groups providing food and support can be found at: <http://www.welcomenet.co.uk/get-support.html>.

Methodology

In March 2020, the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission hosted a celebration event for the end of the second commission, sharing the testimonies of community inspirers and local people with lived experience of poverty with an audience of local council and voluntary sector workers. The Leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council closed the celebration with a commitment to listen to the voices of all people with lived experience of poverty when coordinating work across the council and its partner agencies. The Council accordingly formed the Poverty Truth Advisory Board, containing representatives from the people with lived experience of poverty to ensure their voices are heard.

West Cheshire Foodbank and the Welcome Network are committed to exploring ways of ensuring that community inspirers can collaborate with those working in the local charitable food support sector to shape policy and practice.

Upon reflection that a key purpose of the evaluation was to develop tools to evaluate progress, monitor impact, and share learning, the evaluator facilitated the creation and development of a focus group including community inspirers, and representatives of West Cheshire Foodbank and the Welcome Network. The focus group meets on a fortnightly or monthly basis to discuss ideas, provide feedback on community food proposals, and support policy calls. The group's creation also aligns with the Poverty Truth Commission's vision to embed the learning of the two commissions as a 'golden thread' throughout the Council and local area.

The focus group members also chose to be participants of this evaluation, as they had the experience of attending traditional foodbanks and Meeting Places. This ensured that the voices of people with lived experience continued to be represented/heard, despite the closure of many Meeting Places due to COVID-19 restrictions. The focus group met five times to discuss the themes of this evaluation. The focus group chose collectively to self-identify as Beans on Toast. This represented the group's belief that everyone has the right to a meal of their choice in a home setting. That day one of the people with lived experience wanted to eat Beans on Toast but could not because the items were not available at a foodbank. Beans on Toast symbolises social justice for the group.

To address the challenges of digital exclusion due to inadequate finance to support at-home technology faced by members of the group, the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission Support Team co-facilitates the focus group, providing hardware and technical support to enable the group meetings to continue.

Additionally, between September and November 2020, the evaluator undertook ten , semi-structured interviews with members of West Cheshire Foodbank's staff, as well as the members of the Welcome Network, Citizens Advice Cheshire West, and Cheshire West and Chester Council who had worked on the Meeting Place project. These people are collectively referred to as Meeting Place partners in this report. Permission was sought from appropriate managers of these organisations for staff to be invited to participate in the evaluation and naming of the organisations in this report. The experiences and narratives of Meeting Place partners, and people with lived experience of visiting traditional foodbank distribution centres and Meeting Places, are fundamental to the direct learning shared in this report. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes in this report are from Meeting Place partners.

The research design was approved by the Social and Political Science Department's Research Ethics Committee at the University of Chester.

Report Structure

Part One introduces each of the eight Meeting Place principles by use of quotes from Meeting Place partners and Beans on Toast group members, providing an insight into their experiences and practices. Part Two highlights key achievements of the pilot, including those both expected and unexpected. Part Three provides an overview of the challenges that Meeting Partners experienced during the pilot. It goes on to detail some areas for exploration when further developing Meeting Places. Part Four explains Meeting Places' core set of principles, which can be transferred to a broad range of community food provision centres. Importantly, this scheme cannot simply be replicated, as Meeting Places must adapt to their specific communities. Finally, Part Five describes a Meeting Place progress reporting tool, as well as providing suggestions for evaluating and monitoring progress and impact, opportunities for shared learning and a discussion of the role of the Beans on Toast group.

Part One: Meeting Place Principles and Practice

Meeting Place Principles and Practice

Through this pilot, partners have developed the concept of Meeting Places extensively, and the process of evaluating their work through interviews and focus groups facilitated the identification of a core set of Meeting Place principles. This section of the report provides a summary of all Meeting Place Principles and Practices.

Be Welcoming

For many people, attending a foodbank can be a daunting experience. In fact, members of the Beans on Toast Group stated:



"Having to go to the foodbank was my lowest point. I didn't want to be made to feel worse. I had no pride by then, it felt strange. I was frightened, especially walking into a Church."

"I remember being met by two older ladies with stern faces. I immediately felt looked down upon. I came out feeling ten times worse and said I would never go again!"

"I couldn't breathe properly, I felt humiliated."

"Whilst I was waiting I thought have I really got to this stage, I just wanted to leave."

"There were no signs, I thought it was shut and I didn't know where to go."

"I was told to sit and wait, I didn't know the process, other people kept coming and going and I didn't know what I was supposed to do."

A Meeting Place partner described the benefits in transitioning from a traditional foodbank's welcome to a Meeting Place welcome included ruling out heavy questioning and removing the use of formal questions to a person suspected of being potentially undeserving of continued support.

A Meeting Place creates spaces for conversations and for relationships to develop, and its open doors encourage people to return without the fear of others questioning their deservingness.

A crucial distinction between traditional foodbank sessions and Meeting Places is its framing as a community gathering as opposed to a location to collect a food parcel.

When asked how they would invite a person to a Meeting Place, Meeting Place partners used phrases such as ‘some of us meet at [location] on [date] and at [time] each week, why don’t you come along and have a cuppa and a natter with me?’ They felt that people should be supported to feel that they have a familiar place to visit.

First and foremost, Meeting Places are welcoming places where people may then choose to access the available support. It is important for partners that people do not feel overwhelmed by the offer or feel pressured to engage with advice services. The open invite also facilitates people returning weekly to build a relationship when they do not have a foodbank voucher, and for people to have a welcoming place to visit if an issue arises in their lives. A welcoming environment is key to helping/enabling people to access advice.

“The bottom line is that it’s got to be welcoming and it’s got to be informal and it’s got to be supportive and non-judgemental and confidential, all of those things.”

“It’s got to be a warm and welcoming place that anybody could access, and ideally you could come along whether you needed foodbank or not, it’s just a space that you would feel comfortable in, to just come and have a cup of tea or coffee and have some social interaction.”

“It’s a smiley face, and saying its lovely to meet you, come and have a seat, let’s have a chat.”

“It’s about removing lanyards, computers, laptops, and desks, dressing like everyone else, having a cuppa in my hand and saying “Hiya, how are you? Is there anything I get you?” And then opening up that conversation and just talking together.”

“It’s about making people feel at ease. I know it’s hard, especially when you’re asking for help, some people feel embarrassed, ashamed, and they take a lot of courage to build themselves up to walk into our door. So, you just need to make sure that you are welcoming, you are happy to put the kettle on and you’re happy to have a chat and be there for someone.”

“Some people are apprehensive, anxious, feel negative, and we need to support them positively and with dignity.”

“At each Meeting Place I get a general feeling of warmth and acceptance from all of them and I get a general feeling that they are being led by people who passionately care about their community.”

“They always know that they’re welcome to come back.”

“The language that you use is so important. Asking ‘why are you here today?’, is very different than ‘what’s brought you here today?’. The questions can make people feel very different – one way shows that you understand something has happened in their life to bring them here, there is no judgement. It’s what works and creates a relationship.”

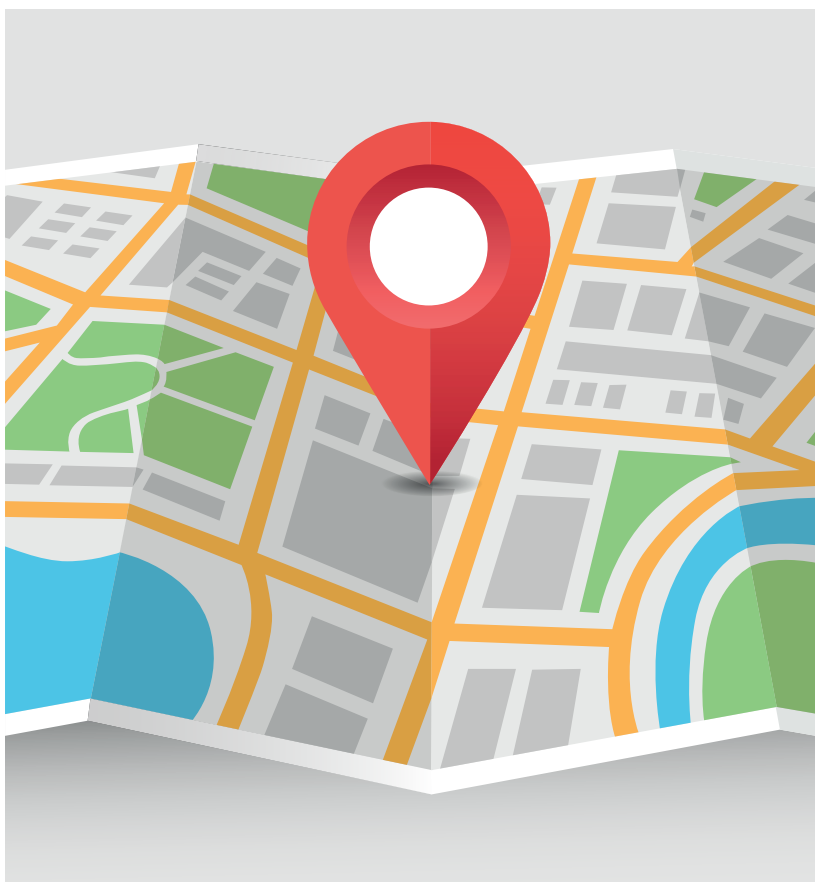
A Beans on Toast member said

“Starting a general conversation can make you relax rather than just being handed carrier bags of food..”

Soft furnishings and a comfortable place to sit were also identified by the Beans on Toast group as making people feel more at ease.

A Trusted Community Venue

Meeting Place partners highlight the importance of an inclusive local community venue for Meeting Places; the Meeting Place is best located within the community of concern.



“I would be very surprised if there was anybody at all that I’ve seen over the four years that I’ve done it, that would say, “Actually, yeah, okay, I’ll jump on a train and go up to Chester”

“They won’t go into Chester to access things, they live in the local community and they haven’t got access to cars so it’s really important that, you know, that those local services are brought into the areas. It’s about making sure that those communities that are harder to reach are reached..”

“Its about setting up in a space where people feel they naturally belong rather than just setting up somewhere new and expecting them to turn up.”

Meeting Place partners found that some pockets of communities were reluctant to leave their very local area and travel to a Citizens Advice office or activities in other areas. Key reasons for preferring local venues included transport costs, and feeling uncomfortable with travelling due to physical or mental health conditions.

With some traditional foodbank distribution centres, people identified feeling judged by people who did not know what it was like to live in that area and live in poverty.

Some Meeting Place partners identified that using staff and volunteers from the local area can help with engaging people and also break down barriers between them and those they perceive as external/official.

“Most of the staff at the community centre also live here so I do think it makes a difference with that first initial conversation when they walk through the door because they kind of know you or where you are from already, it just kind of breaks that barrier.”

Some people at the centre say “oh, I hope the bigwigs aren’t about.” And I’m like what, who? Tell the bigwigs to go away, they say.

The perception that it is not a place of authority evokes trust for people requiring support.

The Beans on Toast group identified that some people do not feel comfortable attending a church, and there was a strong preference for a non-religious community venue. A venue may be part of a religious organisation but must look and feel like a community venue.

Initially, an element of the pilot was hosting a Meeting Place at a Work Zone, a council-led place where unemployed persons could search for jobs, often as a welfare benefit support condition. Some partners anticipated this would be a successful venue, as individuals who were likely to need advice and support were already attending the venue. However, Meeting Place partners struggled to engage with people. Partners attribute this to attendees of the Work Zone not perceiving it as a welcoming environment where they felt trusting and comfortable enough to be open about their issues and/or not focused on attending that venue for one specific purpose. Meeting Places partners established that it was important for attendees to know they had a choice in whether or not to access support, and that the venue was a core factor in communicating this.

Several Meeting Place partners identified the importance of a choice of rooms within a venue. This is key to creating a welcoming and supportive environment for advice that is accessible to all. This allows rooms for group activities, a busy venue that people may feel more able to join with less attention on them, quieter rooms for those needing peace and a place to talk, and private spaces for confidential advice.

Notably, the community venue means that a person could be attending for various reasons, which seeks to reduce the stigma of attending a foodbank.

Be Relational



Meeting Places are based upon multi-organisational partnerships collectively providing a lasting support network for people. For Meeting Place partners, it is vital that people who attend feel that they have a team around them to provide support and confidence with managing issues such as housing and debt.

“It’s important to know that if I get stuck personally, there’s somewhere to go to, there’s someone that will be there for you...I like to make sure that if there’s someone in need, we are there for them.”

At the core of the Meeting Place pilot is a transition from foodbank distribution sessions, which are focused upon a transactional process of food parcel collection, to a place to create and develop supportive and lasting relationships between all who participate.

“I just don’t think you’re going to really benefit someone if you’re just going to give them a box of food and say, “There you go.” Because they’re coming for a whole lot of reasons.”

“I think it was a transactional process before, you came with your voucher, you got your food, you left, there was no relationship, and I think part of the bigger thing for me was Meeting Places in our project, was building relationships, whether it be us as an organisation building relationships with agencies that meant they want to work with us, or our volunteers building relationships with the people coming, because you know, some of them do come on a regular basis, and people accessing food to build relationships with those support agencies, and with each other. That was where the gap was before.”

There are three key factors to building lasting relationships between Meeting Place partners and people experiencing food insecurity:

1. The same Meeting Place partners should attend the sessions. It’s somebody that the volunteers and other staff come to know and collaborate effectively with, and it’s a familiar person for those accessing support.

“We have to be there every week because one week they may be ready [for opening up and accessing support].”

“We’ve worked very hard to employ people who are very relational and who are there every week and they’re part of the furniture.”

2. The Meeting Place must be open on a regular basis, and Meeting Place partners must commit to attending when they say they will.

“I am really, really passionate about this, it’s really important, if you’re saying you’re going to be somewhere then you are...because once you’ve lost them once, you’ve lost them.”

“If they’re having uncertainty or chaos within their lives and they do come to that point, to be able to speak to you at the time, and you’re not there you can do quite a lot of harm.”

3. Shared engagement with activities at Meeting Places aids the building of relationships

“That’s where all the conversations come out, isn’t it, it’s not like an interview. So, you might be chopping some onions, and somebody might say, ‘Oh, you know, the house I’m in...’, or, you know, ‘The debts I’ve got...’”

The strength of relationships between partners is also key to a successful Meeting Place:

“I can be the bridge between other agencies and foodbanks, other agencies and our volunteers, I think I’m quite good at building relationships with people, so whether that be somebody from an agency, or going and getting alongside another community group, and kind of building relationships with them, so they want to be part of the process. I think then also kind of looking at ways that we as an organisation can support other groups.”

"We've got such a great team and we've got a good group of agencies that are happy to work together as well and there is a lot of team work there. There's a lot of support off each other. So, I think it's not just the support that you're giving the people that are walking through the door, it's the support from your colleagues as well, that makes a difference."

"Quite often people come in and they can be, you know, quite aggressive, they can be confrontational, and that's normally because, you know, they're stressed, they've got a lot of issues, you know, they've got to navigate somebody from a certain place telling them that they shouldn't have this foodbank voucher, and they've got all of that. And, you know, to try and bring somebody down from that higher state of anxiety, as well as providing the food, is actually a big job. And, you know, you need a supportive team around you."

"The key to success is agencies working together was a big, like, a biggie because if we didn't work together, we wouldn't be where we are now."

Provide Accessible Advice

Meeting Places offer expert advice for managing a range of issues connected to food insecurity.

This pilot allows an experienced Citizens Advice adviser to be present each week, offering advice on a range of food insecurity issues. A core aspect of the Meeting Place pilot is Citizens Advice offering its services in trusted community venues and advisers building lasting relationships with people. Through Meeting Places, Citizens Advice offers support outside of corporate style offices and traditional outreach venues such as GP surgeries.



"The [Citizens Advice] building is corporate, you know, whichever building you go to, you have to wait, you have to go into an office, you have to have an interview in an interview room. It's a process and of course you don't know who you're going to see because you've got a number of different advisors so you go and see Flossie one day and the next time you see Sarah, so you never have that relationship, so while the Citizens Advice model works very well in many cases, there are times when it fails."

"For some people, Citizens Advice model works well but for some of the most vulnerable it doesn't because they're daunted by the perceived authority."

“We realised that there were queues out the door of our offices, actually, the client experience wasn’t right or suitable for every client. So, you know, we wanted to be, in places that the clients were already familiar with and felt comfortable with.”

At least one adviser from a support service must be available in a Meeting Place session. In some instances, other support service advisers are present such as debt and budgeting advisors, housing advisors, family counsellors, wellbeing advisors, and fuel poverty specialists. Meeting Place partners, with the person’s consent, can introduce the individual experiencing food insecurity to an advisor.

Offering advice in Meetings Places has several interrelated strengths:

1. It allows people to build a relationship with an adviser week on week until they feel comfortable to access support for managing their issues.

If a person is likely to be overwhelmed with attending an office to meet an unknown advisor, they can chat with someone, and then another week they can access advice.

“They might end up coming along to a Meeting Place because they’re hungry...They might not come back for another 2 or 3 weeks but because they’ve met a few people there when they get a letter they don’t understand they come back because they we are there and they feel comfortable.”

“When someone has been a couple of times, next time they need help, coming for support is not such a big thing to do.”

“They’ve got access to the services and support that they deserve and require in the way they need it.”

“It’s very much about how we can get advice into those venues so that people that are most vulnerable can access the advice they need at a time when they feel able to do it and comfortable and confident to do so.”

“Some people need patience, space and time to get to know someone before they access the support they need. We have to be sensitive to this.”

A Beans on Toast member stated

“it helps to know the person has empathy and knows how complex your life is, they aren’t judging you, before you start opening up.”

2. It provides the opportunity for face-to-face advice instantly, without a pre-booked appointment, and in a familiar place.

“For some communities everything is a barrier. If you say ‘here’s a phone number to phone someone’, they won’t. They just walk out, you know, they would walk out the door and they might never make that phone call, whereas with the Meeting Place it’s already there and they’re already there.”

“We’ll hand over a client to an advisor and say ‘Look, this client here is really struggling because...’ and there’s somebody there straight away, because...you lose them if you say, ‘Oh, I’ll tell you what, go to Chester and see this person.’”

“Someone may have been evicted, living in emergency accommodation, suffering domestic violence and need someone they can open up to there and then to get support.”

3. It transforms advising from an interview format to a conversation, which encourages openness and trust.

“We start every conversation with what’s brought you here today and some people tell us a little bit, some people tell more but it’s about acknowledging we know that there will be other circumstances as to why they’ve come here and it is that metaphorical arm that might just present an opportunity for someone to open up in that moment of need.”

4. It reassures Meeting Place partners that there is a person with expertise in the room, which encourages them to start conversations with people about the causes and harms of food insecurity.

“If a person comes in with an issue or a crisis and you don’t feel limited in what you can do, you feel like there is a next step for them in that room.”

“You can actually have that conversation with people that come into the building because you’re not frightened of what you’re going to hear because you know you have someone who can do something about it and that is so freeing when you’re in the foodbank.”

“Someone can tell you about a problem and you can say I know [name of advisor] and she may be able to help with this, would you like me to ask her to come over and I will get you a cup of tea?”

“You can often see people at their lowest point, it can be terrifying, what we want to do is help, but, you know, you’re very limited in your knowledge and...you can get it wrong. But it’s made things easier for people, my job’s certainly a lot easier because I know who to go in the room to get the right support for the things that I don’t know.”

5. It supports volunteers’ perception that a person who is repeatedly accessing food support has an ongoing issue and therefore genuine need without the volunteer asking questions of the person without a voucher.

“You let the volunteering staff know that...if this person comes, you really need to help them and they trust me on that.”

6. It enables/allows many people who have not previously accessed advice and support to access it in familiar surroundings, and continue to access advice, with the aim of preventing or reducing their need for further food support.

“If somebody needs foodbank voucher...it’s a symptom rather than a cause and that if somebody doesn’t have enough money to choose their own food in a shop there are probably reasons why that is and so having the Citizens Advice which is very holistic in terms of letting people know what they’re entitled to, supporting people through that process, it means that you’re looking at all the avenues that there could possibly be to maximise someone’s income so that they don’t have to use foodbank.”

7. It encourages people to seek advice from other support agencies, whether part of the Meeting Place or not, recommended by an advisor, because trust and confidence have been built.

8. It provides access to a range of advisors on different issues in one place at one time.

"Nobody has just one issue, you know, there's a number of issues and people benefit from a team of people being available at the same time in the same place working together."

"We are in a better condition to cover everything with all agencies working together."

The collaboration of partner organisations in Meeting Places means partners can be a hub of services for people, reducing the need to signpost them to lots of other places.

"If they've learnt to trust you and then you suggest that they go over to that other advisor in the room, I think it's keeping that relationship going, isn't it? I'll go and sit with them [advisor and person] for the first five minutes or so. And once you see that they're alright, I'll just say, 'I'll tell you what, I'll leave you to it now, you have a chat with them and come back to me if you want to' and that's been absolutely brilliant."

"It's about people not having to go to lots of different places and re-tell their stories."

Focus on Wellbeing

At Meeting Places, there are activities that seek to have a positive impact on people's wellbeing. Beans on Toast partners explain that when accessing food support people can feel embarrassed, low, and in some cases suicidal. They explain that a Meeting Place could lift people up, rather than community food support pushing them down.



"I have never been so low than when I first went into poverty. People need to understand what people are going through because life stories can open your mind."

"I really needed a pick me up, I couldn't feel any lower."

"I felt like I was going down a big hole and I didn't know if there would be a light at the end of the tunnel."

“I desperately needed a place to talk and get things off my chest.”

At Meeting Places, activities contribute to tackling isolation and marginalisation, encouraging people to stay in the community venue for longer and revisit. Through Meeting Place activities, partners seek to lift moods, and enable attendees to develop skills to build self-esteem, confidence, and provide opportunities for continued engagement.

“It’s kind of about catching them before they get to that point where they are at their lowest.”

“You are often very low or chaotic at the point you need to use foodbank; sometimes emotions are displayed as aggression. So, there is a need to support people’s mental health.”

“A Meeting Place is a place of support and a place of belonging in a local community.”

“I think just having conversations with people really has a boost to your mental health, you know, for some people the only time they might get out is to come to one of our sessions, not because they need foodbank food but because they need that conversation, they come for that companionship”

“I’d like to think, you know, that people who are regularly attending do have a sense of belonging and a sense of growing confidence from attending the Meeting Places and that certainly would be the goal...I think that feeling of wellbeing, you know, that could be because you’ve had a nice chat with someone because you’ve had a cup of tea, it might be that you’ve got more fruit and veg, it might be that you can now go home and cook a meal, it might be that you’ve done some craft or it might be that you’ve just sat somewhere warm, caught your breath for five minutes and you feel a bit better about the world.”

“Cooking and art group are playing a part in people’s wellbeing, and...kind of encouraging people to get out to socialise, to mix, to try new things.”

“Having a place to go, to get out, to just have a brew, not to have a cup of coffee by themselves, they’re having a cup of coffee with new friends almost, that they’re meeting on a regular basis. So, I do think it did have an impact on people’s wellbeing, and their mental health.”

“it’s the social isolation, it’s about creating a welcoming space, where, if they get up on a day like today and it’s grey and gloomy and it’s a Thursday, “Well, actually, you know, I’ve been in there before, it was okay”, you know, there’s a familiar face when they go in, they have somewhere to go.”

“if someone was lonely, for example, you might say to them, oh could you come and help out, make the teas, you actually know that they might be on hard times but...a role might build confidence and develop their skills.”

“I think what’s nice about that is that there’s something like the pool table is how that transcends across generations, like you see in young people playing with people from the care home over the road. An older gentleman who has Alzheimer’s plays pool with the young lads...that was the highlight of his week coming across to the Meeting Place.”

To date at Meeting Places, activities include pop-up cooking and sharing a meal, art classes, knitting and sewing, growing food, gardening, writing, playing music, board games, playing pool, volunteering, and training on topics such as building.

Meeting Place partners invite people to attend other events and activities hosted in the community venue, such as use of the community gym, health walks, and classes for different age groups, all available at other times of the week. They also signpost people to further support using information folders.

“Just from observations, I’ve seen people that have come to foodbank and then you see them a few weeks later at [community venue] playing pool, or you see them at [different community venue] and you’ve mentioned the art group that’s there on a Thursday, that’s taking place, I’ve seen people come along and then they’ve kind of, we’ve talked to them about pop-up cooking and then they rock up for pop-up cooking at one of the sessions, and have a look at what’s going on.”

One community centre uses the Local Authority Time Credits scheme, rewarding volunteering with credit. People are choosing to use the credit to take their family to an attraction or book a space in the community centre to host activities with friends.

“We might not be getting any money for it but we’re having people booking the community centre that historically probably would never have booked the community centre and they’ve got those time credits via doing something, you know, within the community as well... It’s kind of like a nice circle of volunteering and expenditure and them having something to do.”

Promote Dignity in Practices

Closely linked with a focus on wellbeing is Meeting Places’ emphasis on dignity in practices. Nourish Scotland’s Dignity Principles inform this element of the pilot, which we have adopted with the aim that all those attending our Meeting Places feel:

- + a sense of control**
- + able to take part in community**
- + nourished and supported**
- + involved in decision-making**
- + valued and able to contribute**

(Bloemen, Kontoravdis, and Marshall, 2018, p. 3)

Meeting Places seeks to support a sense of control by giving people some choice over the food they eat. Rather than volunteer-chosen food parcels, people have some choice over the food they take home, for example, through an open shelving system or trolley.

Beans on Toast members spoke of wanting choice to help avoid the waste of being given food they will not eat because of dietary requirements or dislike of the item/flavour.

“By providing more choice through what we’re doing, so that it doesn’t feel like you get what you’re given and that’s it, and you should just be grateful for what you’re given, but that people feel that they’re more part of the process.”

"If somebody hasn't got very much money, a bag of tins very rarely solves a long-term problem, so this is needed because it's not very dignified for somebody to choose the food that you will eat when you are particularly in hard times... and feeling vulnerable and feeling low and that you have very little choice in your life, so that's one thing, so it's not dignified to do it."

"Setting up shelves has been very positive. instead of people being handed bags of prepacked food, they could walk around the shelves and pack the things that they may choose to eat, the right flavour of soup, the type of fish that they might eat and the type of cereal that they would choose to eat."

There is a commitment to inviting people to influence the form and progression of Meeting Places

"Eventually we would like people to feel that they have a say in it, that actually they can have some influence on where a setting or a group will go. So that it's not agencies thinking they know best how to run something in a community, that actually the community has some sort of ownership over it, and has some influence on what's going on. Because actually they're the people it's supposed to serve, they know what they need and what they want."

"We have conversations with people about what they would like to see, what activities they want to do."

"It is also a place where whatever is planned ideally is led by local people. It is then in partnership, led by and with local people with experience or people in the local area with experience."

"First of all, you encourage people to come back even if they don't need foodbank, they can just come back and be part of the morning, and then talking to them about what interests they have, and that maybe having an influence on what activities are done."

"We get a lot of community feedback through social media. We do SurveyMonkey as well. The majority of it is people coming back from social media saying it was amazing, it was great or this didn't work but can you try this. it's negative and positive feedback, we like both, to be honest because we need to know where we're going wrong to fix it."

Share Food



"Meeting Place is a place where there is food but that could be food in its broadest sense, so it could be foodbank, it could be a pantry, it could be a community meal but there is a food offer in recognition that there is a food need."

Hot breakfast sandwiches, bread, toast, scones, and toasties are offered in Meeting Places to meet food need, encourage people to stay and develop relationships.

The pilot provided funding to support people to undertake food hygiene training and attain a certificate to host cooking activities in community venues.

“In pop-up cookery there’s a group of people who are cooking with the foodbank ingredients, there’s a lovely smell to the room, there is a chance for people to try new things without spending lots of money but then there’s also a chance for people to take the ingredients home and to make that food for them. So that’s an example of shared food, shared as in a shared experience of watching somebody cook and shared as in if you went back the following week you’d be able to report back on the food that you’d made. I would say this is a goal for Meeting Places.”

Beans on Toast members spoke of the importance of dietary requirements being understood and catered for to make them feel included in activities and to support their health.

Adapt

Meeting Places are an evolving and adapting entity that reflects the needs of a community’s social issues.

“You don’t really set it up and everything just works at once, it’s always about development, I think it will always be about development and it has to always be.”

“It’s an active and live thing that needs to adjust and change.”

“Meeting Places is never achieved, you never tick off criteria, like you have to think of it as a vision and the vision is always to never just rest on your laurels with it because there will always be something that’s happening somewhere that you can learn from and develop with it, so seeing it as always a process... so the minute you kind of would seek to rest on it, there’s probably something else that you’re missing or not learning from or you’ve become so relaxed with it that you’ve normalised it as well so it’s constantly managing that.”

“The connections, partnerships and the principles underpinning it can be flexible in the different physical contexts that they need to be.”

“You’ve got a concept but it will probably be bespoke to what the needs and requirements are within those areas.”

“it’s recognising it needs to grow with and from the bottom with people doesn’t it.”

“If we’d had a set way of working and a set thing that you wanted to achieve, then it really wouldn’t work, you have to adapt to the need.”

“Adapting has been the crux of it, actually, we’ve been able to respond to that need and adapt for each of the settings. Each one of them works really well but slightly differently.”

Crucially, a Meeting Place should reflect and adapt to the particular social issues the community is facing at that time.

“If a Meeting Place is effective and then food insecurity wasn’t an issue, the next social issue that popped up for that community, it would have the tools to be able to respond to it. Whatever social issue arises, if the principles are followed it can be resolved with the support of a Local Authority and other organisations but through a community.”

“I think if you keep Meeting Places rooted in a community provision rather than food poverty, what you really like to hope is that you’re just offering a community provision that’s there even if the benefit system was fixed, even if everybody got a job people still need to come together as community, so I think if you take the heart of it, which is about local people playing an active role in their local communities and being supported by proactive partners to support provision.”

Part Two: Key Achievements

Key Achievements

This part captures the most significant achievements of the Meeting Place pilot.

The development of a set of principles for community food provision

As showcased in Part One, throughout the pilot Meeting Place partners developed a set of valuable principles to inform the development of community food provision.

Enabling people to access advice, specifically those who are less likely to seek advice outside community settings. This pilot's core anticipated outcome, to create conditions that made advice more accessible to people who generally refrain from seeking advice outside of community settings has been achieved.

"Seeing people who are accessing advice that maybe wouldn't go to a formal setting of an office and would maybe perhaps bury their heads in the sands and avoid making that phone call, going and accessing support and advice because it's there in a place where they feel safe, where they feel that it is okay to go and get support and advice is a big achievement."

"It has reached people that we wouldn't have otherwise reached. The clients that we've seen in some of the settings, you know, have told us quite categorically that they wouldn't have come to us in a Citizens Advice building. So, I think for me the other big impact is the individual impact that it's had, you know, so some people being rehoused, people having additions to income, you know, maybe £50/£60 a week because they've seen us so I think it's that and it's those people that would never have come to us."

In some Meeting Places, advisors have become so busy that a queue waiting system had to be created, and this was connected to a high level of repeat attendees seeking advice on a regular basis.

The below table shows the recorded number of adults who accessed advice in each Meeting Places, the recorded number of appointments and the recorded number of people who benefited i.e. household size, between the period of 1st March 2019 to 29th February 2020 .

	Number of adults who accessed advice.	Number of appointments	Number of people who benefitted i.e. household size
Lache Foodie Friday	44	124	161
Trinity Meeting Place	112	136	173
Snack and Chat	93	137	108
Wesley Meeting Place	87	183	109

Please note that these numbers only include recorded cases and do not include when advisors have provided comparatively simple and short guidance to a person only once or when as advisor issued an emergency food voucher and did not hold a full appointment in order to avoid a delay access to food. Therefore the impact is bigger than these numbers suggest. (data source: West Cheshire Citizens Advice, 2021).

The below table shows the number of vouchers fulfilled in each Meeting Place, and the number of adults and children provide with emergency food via the vouchers, and total number of people provided with emergency food via vouchers, between the period of 1st March 2019 to 29th February 2020 .

	Number of vouchers fulfilled	Numbers of adults provided with emergency food via the vouchers	Number of children provided with emergency food via the vouchers	Total number of people provided with emergency food via vouchers
Lache Foodie Friday	536	839	642	1481
Trinity Meeting Place	944	1211	665	1876
Snack and Chat	850	1071	584	1655
Wesley Meeting Place	1312	1601	630	2231

(data source: West Cheshire Foodbank, 2021).

Comparing the total number of people provided with emergency food via vouchers to the number of people who benefitted i.e. household size, indicates that whilst it is a key achievement that people are offered advice and are accepting advice, a key area for development is increasing the proportion of people who access emergency food provision in Meeting Places accessing advice.

Creation of a broad partnership-led support network

This pilot achieved the anticipated outcome of creating the conditions and support network for people experiencing food insecurity and wider poverty, in order to provide more than just food. Whilst advice has been a core element of the community food provision, so has support with physical items and isolation.

“Just from chatting with a person we’ve been able to provide so much more than food, you know, we’ve been able to offer that support, advice, but then we’ve been able to access a bike for somebody, or a coat for somebody, a microwave, and lots of different things, because of that network that we’ve built up.”

“A young lad that went into the [venue], he just turned up and was young and completely vulnerable. He was being used by drug people to store things in his flat, he had no food. What we didn’t realise was that they were waiting for him when he came out with his food and they were taking it off him. That was absolutely heart-breaking. It took a few weeks to find that out, we just thought he was coming, and we made him welcome and we got him his food and we thought he was fine. And it was only after building up that relationship and having that trust, that, you know, a chance sentence came out that gave us a bit of a warning, which we followed up with gentle questioning. He looked horrendous and was so hungry. We were giving him this food, and we were thinking, well, he mustn’t be eating it, but they were taking it off him around the corner. After that he was at the [venue] probably five to seven times a week. He’d come for a cooked meal. We got him involved with the [name of club] club, which became a safe place.

We knew then that he was having a hot meal, because nobody took that off him. And he was going to the church, he was going to the youth club, playing pool while he was there. And all the time, without him probably knowing, there was a group of people all looking out for him. Without the relational approach you would never have known. And it took weeks to find that out, too."

"We were seeing a lot of homeless people in Ellesmere Port we had a period where there was a group that was staying in tents down by the canal, partly because they couldn't get anywhere because they didn't have significant links to the area, so they had to wait I think six months before they were even able to go on the housing register, but the volunteers were like knitting them hats, were collecting sleeping bags, so I think it's that relational side of it, that kind of everybody that's involved wants to support people that are struggling in their community."

"We've brought together so many different people into community venues who wouldn't normally be there."

"Definitely the partnership working, definitely the creating the team around the client...they've got access to the services and support that they deserve and require."

Partnership working has also provided a support network for Meeting Place partners.

"I think the other one is that it has undoubtedly built relationships within the communities, and between organisations and partnerships that we wouldn't have otherwise had and those have been beneficial to clients, to volunteers and to staff."

As noted in the section on accessible advice, partnership with advisory organisations provides reassurance to Meeting Place partners in that there is a person with expertise in the room to support them in starting conversations with people about the causes of their food insecurity. This is a key achievement as it facilitates conversations with people about the issue(s) causing food insecurity.

Reflecting the adaptability of Meeting Places, Meeting Place partners also identified that the principles, experiences and effective partnership relationships developed during the pilot meant that when the COVID19 pandemic hit the UK, Meeting Place partners were equipped to adapt and continue their support. This is a key achievement: coordination and provision of community food during COVID-19 would have been impossible without the background of the pilot.

"the philosophy of Meeting Places meant when COVID hit they could be turned on a hairpin into a community food distribution. Because of the partnerships when COVID happened, and the normal way of giving out food was thrown on its head, those trusted relationships were able to emerge into something that was fit for purpose in a pandemic. The adaptability of the concept and the trusted relationships and the list of partners involved were key to responding to the need."

The principles, experiences and effective partnerships, championed by Cheshire West Voluntary Action through its connections with Cheshire West and Chester's local authority meant that when COVID-19 hit the authority's food security team partnered with Welcome Network and a number of Meeting Place partners to develop the strategic response during the pandemic.

Development opportunities for staff and volunteers

Some Meeting Place partners highlighted that a key achievement of the pilot was the opportunity to put the Meeting Place concept into practice, to facilitate existing volunteers of West Cheshire Foodbank to understand the concept.

“I think originally some of the volunteers from foodbank they weren’t quite sure about what it was we were trying to achieve and the biggest success is we got buy-in.”

Some Meeting Place partners also identified that the pilot had allowed them to explore local communities’ needs, learn ways of working, and develop knowledge and experience that gave them greater expertise in the area of food security, which gives them influence with other organisations.

“Many staff have grown into that role and many have done things that they never thought they would do, you know, in terms of going out to different places and doing different things.”

Greater engagement with the offers of community venues

A key achievement has been increased community engagement with community venues, including Meeting Places and the broader provision within the venue.

“Three years ago, there was something like a 30% footfall. Before COVID-19 hit we were up to like an 80% footfall so it kind of, it was just turning it round and making sure people was aware...that we’re here to help, anything you need.”

“People that we’ve never seen before that’d go to the doctors and then they’d pop in for a brew and they’d be like, “Oh, my God, we’ve lived here for like 30 years and we’ve never been here.”

Impact on Strategy development for partner organisations

A core achievement of the Meeting Place pilot is its impact on formulating organisational strategies for the borough’s future. The extent of impact, unanticipated by a number of Meeting Place partners, could create long-lasting change in the borough.

Feeding West Cheshire strategy

Feeding West Cheshire seeks to develop and deliver a wider food strategy that draws on connections across Cheshire West and Chester Council: specifically the Eat Well Be Active Partnership board, which reports to the Health and Wellbeing Board, and the Poverty Truth Commission.

The strategy builds upon the holistic approach to addressing food poverty led by the Welcome Network, which includes health, wellbeing, and sustainable food. Both the voices of people with lived experience of food insecurity and broader poverty and the Poverty Truth Commission’s learning underpin the strategy. This is an ambitious strategy and project that seeks to pull together the multiple factors associated with poverty, and food poverty, in order to live in a borough where everyone has access to affordable and healthy food in a dignified way, and the ability to make a decent meal.

The piloting of Meeting Place and the development of its principles are informing the Feeding West Cheshire strategy. This was unforeseeable at the beginning of the strategy, and the context of COVI-19 and close working between

Meeting Place partners and the local authority facilitated this significant development and achievement

“West Cheshire Foodbank has played a very significant role in the place where West Cheshire [in its Feeding West Cheshire strategy] would like to see itself in a few years. I think, mainly through this pilot, it’s championed the principles of dignity, I think it’s challenged its volunteers, and it’s challenged its future plan with some of those principles of Meeting Places, so it’s significantly changed both the present operation and the long-term plan for West Cheshire.”

In one Meeting Place partners words, Meeting Place principles “are the backbone of the [Feeding West Cheshire] strategy:”

“There’s absolutely no way that we could have written the strategy as we have with all these comprehensive elements and with so many different people involved without having done this pilot. I think the pilot reveals to us that it is complicated, it is multifaceted and you need to keep a mind’s eye, not that everything needs to be included, it just needs a mind’s eye on all the different things that could be playing a role in supporting people have access to food and addressing the issue of poverty and sometimes that presenting itself as a need for food.”

For a Meeting Place partner the pilot has been “the outworking of some of the strategic thinking and will give legitimacy to Feeding West Cheshire strategy because it is underpinned by the principles, experience, knowledge, and partnerships developed in the pilot. There may have been a council strategy on food security without the Welcome Network project and the pilot, but it would not have been “written by a grassroots-led partnership”; this is a very significant achievement with great potential for developing sustainable community food provision.

“I think it’s [the pilot] brought people with us, so people are open and willing to have a conversation, I think when the strategy is done, I hope that people will respect it and want to be involved with it and want to be in line with it and again, that would never have happened if we didn’t have this track record of development work, dignity, partners and everything else.”

“Feeding Britain funding, asking us challenging questions, helping us to put that mirror across to Coventry, what have they been doing, entirely different concept but I think we can learn from each other – all of that has been very important to developing the strategy.”

It is hoped that the Feeding West Cheshire strategy, informed by the learning of the pilot, will become a catalyst for fundamental change in food security going forward.

“I’d like to hope that it is a catalyst for a better offer for local people, you know, for people in their communities, that they don’t have to find their way into their local town and get on a bus, that it’s not really difficult to find local services and also there’s not a fragmentation of things that are available to them... At the basic level it’s a catalyst for change for people because they can access the services, I think it’s also a catalyst of change in mindset. A change in mindset that is about local people feeling empowered to be a part of the solution themselves, you know, wouldn’t it be amazing, I mean, you know, we’d love, I would love, you know, social enterprises to pop up making affordable food for people and you know, local people finding jobs, finding opportunities for things but also that change in mindset for partnerships that say we’re stronger when we all work together.”

The Welcome Network project strategy

The pilot provided opportunities for the development of the Welcome Network project, including extending its remit, improving its credibility, and figuring out its position in the broader strategy for West Cheshire food security.

“The pilot massively supported the development of the Welcome Network because it gave staff time and we have mutually learnt from others, it’s kind of given that credibility to the work of the Welcome Network. The Welcome Network predominantly was set up from the Council, primarily for holiday provision. This pilot provided that balance [of supporting broader community food provision] and then kind of given even more balance to the wider strategy [ensuring it is more than holiday provision].

“We’ve now through this come to kind of an understanding that the Welcome Network is specialist [operational] infrastructure support...We’re looking as part of the strategy to make more of that specialist infrastructure support so the thinking is that the Welcome Network will possibly split...so firstly that the operational side of the community provision stays quite operational. Then the strategic work would be undertaken as part of the Feeding West Cheshire strategy initiative.”

West Cheshire Citizens Advice strategy

From the outset, the pilot was intentionally an opportunity for Citizens Advice Cheshire West to trial offering advice outside of the organisation’s office, and in community venues that are familiar to the people they are actively seeking to advise. . A key achievement of the pilot is the extent of the impact it has had on West Cheshire Citizens Advice’s strategy.

The Cheshire West Citizens Advice’s organisational strategy was informed by the learning gained throughout the pilot, and the number of individuals who had not previously attended the organisation’s offices accessing advice. The organisation has sought funding for further development of community support.

“Undoubtedly the biggest achievement, from our point of view anyway, is that it has informed a strategy shift, a seismic strategy shift.”

“So essentially the Meeting Place’s pilot has enabled us to pilot the work that has now become our future strategy.”

“It’s pretty major after Citizens Advice have worked in that particular way for so long. It is massive. I mean, it’s not unique to Cheshire West, there are other people, there are other offices that have, for different reasons, come to the same conclusion.”

“For Citizens Advice, I think they’d always wanted to work more in the local community, this has given the ideal opportunity for them to do so and my understanding is that it is significantly shaping their strategy and some of the learning from this and some of the positive outcomes from this, they are thinking through for their longer-term work as well.”

For one Meeting Place partner, from the pilot “we know that it [advice provision in familiar community setting] works.”

Citizens Advice identified three strategic advantages of providing advice in a community setting:

- Access to clients who do not visit Citizens Advice offices or their traditional outreach venues.
- Reduced buildings costs , allowing the organisation to adapt to potential funding cuts, and create opportunities to fund more advisory staff.
- The opportunity to offer advice in larger spaces enabled greater flexibility in complying with COVID19 regulations.

As part of the strategy, Citizens Advice Cheshire West developed a number of other initiatives based on the premise of making advice accessible to people who have not previously accessed Citizens Advice offices or their traditional outreach venues. These initiatives are/include Community Access Point (CoAP), Volunteer Connectors and Community Connectors.

“Historically, most people have accessed the Citizens Advice service by travelling to offices in Chester city centre and the town centres of Ellesmere Port, Northwich and Winsford. In 2019/20, 73% of clients from Cheshire West made first contact with Citizens Advice Cheshire West in this way, with a further 2% dropping in at community locations.

This meant that most people were sustaining travel costs in order to obtain advice, which then places a further financial burden on the most economically disadvantaged.

A CoAP would enable people to contact Citizens Advice much closer to where they live. Combined with enhanced telephone and online services, CoAPs would significantly improve accessibility, reducing travel and other associated costs...We want to provide community advice: the right help in the right place at the right time.

CoAPs will be available in local venues and differ in what they offer. This table outlines what various CoAPs could look like. Each will require a different level of commitment and physical space, which will be explored with the venue and its volunteers/workers/teams.”

Concept A
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person signposting or referral by a volunteer connector
Concept B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person signposting or referral by a volunteer connector • Freephone or smartphone • Local email
Concept C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person signposting or referral by a volunteer connector • Freephone or smartphone • Local email • Video call with adviser
Concept D
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person signposting or referral by a volunteer connector • Freephone or smartphone • Local email • Video call with adviser • In-person advice

Concept E

- In-person signposting or referral by a volunteer connector
- Freephone or smartphone
- Local email
- Video call with adviser
- In-person advice and casework

Volunteer Connectors will	Community Connectors will ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Share local information and knowledge with clients• Signpost to advice and support at Citizens Advice Cheshire West• Refer people to Community Connectors for longer term support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work with clients on a long term basis who are particularly vulnerable• Meet clients when and where is comfortable and accessible for the client• Connect clients to services and advice where appropriate.• Follow up and check progress.• Withdraw gradually as the client builds confidence and independence.

“Volunteer Connectors are people who already are volunteering or working in the community. So, as an example, a hairdresser listens to people’s problems while they’re getting their hair cut and rather than not being able to do anything about that, what he can now do, he’s been coached by us to recognise emergencies and then to be able to point people in the right direction, to say well actually, there is somebody that can actually help with this, have you thought about contacting and that could be the community connector, that might be right, it could be the foodbank, it could be the local health scheme, it could be Citizens Advice but he’s been trained to triage really, but to add value to what he’s already doing essentially.”

“A Community connector works for Citizens Advice in community venues, and sees clients for 6-7 weeks in order to go through problems A to E, build up a relationship and get the client to a better place.”

Part Three: Challenges and Areas for Exploration

Challenges

Managing conflicts and different cultures in close communities

One of the challenges of local people working at a Meeting Place is managing previous conflicts.

“We’ve had a few instances...where there’s a certain member of staff that didn’t get on with certain people so they wouldn’t come in the door and things like that. So, it was just breaking those barriers and saying that’s not how it works, you have to be civil, you just have to be nice.”

The local reputation of Meeting Place partners is important to achieving objectives, so support with conflict resolution may be needed if issues arise.

The closeness of communities can mean it is a challenge to protect people’s confidentiality.

“Everybody knows everybody in [community name] and they want to know everybody’s business.”

Protecting people’s privacy is key, and requires use of private rooms, and in some cases conversations outside the venue. In some close communities, it is a challenge for people not from that community to gain recognition and trust of the community.

“It’s like one big family, you have to, I wouldn’t necessarily say that you have to be in it to like be a part of it, but if you’re an outsider coming in, it’s quite hard to get in. But then once you’re in, you’ve made that friendship.”

“Didn’t get anywhere there, they were so suspicious, clients didn’t want me to sit on the table with them. And I got probably, in the time that I went there, two clients.”

“some are concerned that if they ask for information they will be reported to social services.”

“The clients in that particular community were very closed, very suspicious. And didn’t, you know, probably didn’t need, or didn’t need or want us there.”

“There are some communities that actually just don’t want the help and interestingly when we talked to one of the schools, one of the headteachers said the same to us, you know, that we know these parents need help, they know they need help but they are never ever going to seek that help no matter how much we try and persuade them to... maybe it’s a pride thing, maybe it’s just a well we’ll manage ourselves, who knows what it is but it’s there.”

A group can come to dominate a Meeting Place making it less inclusive of others.

“The Meeting Place develops so in-tune with the people who come to it and they have an influence over it so much that it kind of grows with them, that then it’s for some and not for others, accidentally.”

“We are reliant on having those strong relationships and we absolutely need that but then... If you have too strong a relationship with just a small group of people it inhibits other people from going along.”

“I think sometimes part of the issue is you do get the same faces going to the same ones, and not that its territorial, I don’t mean it like that, but I think sometimes some of those people might be off-putting to new people.”

“You get the same families kind of going and it gets a bit noisy in their session because they’re all talking to each other and different people and stuff, so I think if you are a new person to [community name] or you’re maybe not from that area it could be a little bit off-putting.”

“one of the breadmaking sessions became predominantly for people with learning difficulties, which can then be a barrier to...different groups joining. I think that’s sometimes the issue with Meeting Places, that one group of people that you’re helping can be a barrier to other people accessing stuff, and not in a, necessarily in a negative way, but just if people think...I’m not like them, it can sometimes put people off.”

“There’s the issue that in some places you can set up a concept which means that you end up with a core group of clients that go every week and you don’t get new people in because it becomes a bit of a clique.”

Balancing the different needs and preferences of people attending Meeting Places can be challenging.

“For some a busy room can be intimidating but for others a quiet room can be intimidating, too many activities can be overwhelming, too few and then the space has no atmosphere and all this has to be managed and figured out.”

“I’d say when we done some stuff last summer... we had too much on at the same time. So, it was kind of an overload of stuff. Whereas we’ve learnt if we spread things out, it can work better.”

Meeting Partners can encourage people to feel included and different physical spaces within a community venue can be key. Meeting Partners can encourage people so they feel more included. Different physical spaces within a community venue are important to ensure inclusive spaces for all. There is an indication that larger venues attract more diverse people to Meeting Places. However, the community venue provider plays a key role in determining the space available, and this is to be negotiated.

Developing a supportive relationship whilst encouraging self-reliance

A key challenge for Meeting Place partners is securing trust from people but also encouraging them to be self-reliant.

Advisors can become inundated with requests for support, which can result in sessions becoming very busy and requiring a queue control system.

“When they trust you, they can come to rely on you and expect support with everything, including their child not being happy at school.”

“I think dependency is an issue. I think from our point of view with the Citizens Advice work, we would say that the dependency is less of an issue because actually, once we’ve got to the end of the problems we are able to say, well actually, you don’t need us now but I think that’s harder to do within a Meeting Place because it’s that social aspect.”

A key tension is managing the co-development of trust and self-reliance.

Meeting Place partners’ training should include a focus on managing boundaries and expectations. Meeting Place partners could also explore training opportunities for people attending Meeting Place, as part of the development aspect of building confidence and the ability to address issues with greater independence.

Volunteers changing their behaviour to reflect principles

Supporting volunteers to change their behaviours to align with Meeting Place principles can be a key challenge.

In transitioning a session from a regular foodbank distribution session to a Meeting Place, a vital issue was volunteers adjusting to the required changes in behaviour.

“Transitioning from one concept to another, from that foodbank transactional concept to the other has its challenges in ways that potentially if you were setting up something new, you wouldn’t have to overcome because the volunteers hadn’t got used to a normal.”

“I think sometimes people do get stuck in their ways and stuck in a rut, and just because something has always worked one way doesn’t mean changing it is not a good thing, I think change for change’s sake is not, and I think sometimes they maybe thought that was what was happening, and you have to demonstrate there is a reason for it.”

“I think one of the key challenges is volunteers, because I think when you are working with a group of people that have done something a certain way for a certain amount of time, that is always a challenge, because I think people get set in their ways, and sometimes they don’t always clearly see what the future is, and then the bigger picture, and where you’re trying to go to.”

“Now you have to try and create a relationship with someone who in the first instance when they came to get food you just gave it them and didn’t try to get to know them and that’s a transition... they used to leave when they had the food and now you want them to stay, it’s a very different kind of set up than what you know.”

In places where progress towards some Meeting Place principles has been made, such as an advisor being available, encouraging volunteers to engage in other changes, such as those focused on dignity, this can be even more challenging:

“It was more difficult trying to explain things to them and talk to them about it, because in their heads they were, everything was fine, they had made the changes, they did not see what else needed changing.”

"I think they were also one of the groups that... maybe did a bit more questioning than some groups, to make sure we're seeing the same people over and over again, and why we're giving a voucher. Some volunteers are part of churches or groups where they collect food for foodbank and they see people giving regularly, and maybe sacrificially giving when it's a struggle for them to give ... and then at sessions can sometimes appear to them that Joe Bloggs has had 15 vouchers of food and he just seems to be continually getting them, and he doesn't seem to be moving on anywhere with his life, so they start asking questions... so I think it's, then difficult for them to be kind in this situation."

"It's about creating a relationship but for some volunteers that can feel like, well it's the same people always coming back and we're always helping them and always giving them, food and you know, what's the end goal here and kind of feeling a bit lost or is this enough or are we doing too much."

"Some volunteers have a real perception of what dignity and who's deserving and that can sometimes hold a Meeting Place back from developing. Others can be really quite radical in their views about not wanting to use vouchers and not wanting referrals and wanting to be inclusive, and it's just the culture of the volunteer sometimes that determine how quickly something becomes a Meeting Place."

Meeting Place partners identify that conversations with volunteers have been key to overcoming this challenge.

"You can't just go in there and go, right, we're doing this, it's about building up trust and building up listening to what they've got to say, because actually they have got some valid points, they have got some experience you maybe haven't got, they have got insight into stuff that you haven't got, so I think again it's building up relationships."

Beans on Toast group members suggested having one-to-one conversations with volunteers on what it is like to live in food insecurity and what it is like to support someone experiencing food insecurity to develop understanding and empathy.

Manging tensions between developing a supportive relationship and requiring foodbank vouchers

One of the main difficulties with implementing Meeting Place principles into a traditional foodbank distribution session is developing a supportive relationship with a person who attends a foodbank session, a relationship of trust and open discussion about the person's issues, and then requiring they have a voucher to access emergency food. For some this can be uncomfortable, as it feels as though asking someone who trusts you for proof of need. West Cheshire Foodbank has maintained the voucher system for the purposes of food management and data collection. At a Meeting Place, Citizens Advice can issue a voucher or the person can speak with the borough council helpline and request an e-referral for emergency food.

Meeting development officers can continue to explore alternative models to vouchers that may satisfy the needs of food management and data collection, whilst more effectively aligning with the principle of being relational.

Securing sustainable funding for staff

A key challenge is ensuring sustainable funding for staff to support Meeting Places.

Staff are vital to developing and maintaining the partnerships between organisations collaborating on Meeting Places.

Funding of development staff, and increasing their knowledge and experience, is also key to supporting new and existing Meeting Places across the borough.

"I do think funding's important, to have somebody in place that can sort out funding to get a food hygiene certificate so you can do meals, or a first aid course so that you've got a first aider on site, you know, that's all these little things that you can be taken for granted".

"You can't underestimate what they [development staff] have learnt about local communities during this time. So they've had to take their time to know people, they've had to take their time to be responsive to the speed in which people want to develop and you know, with this funding coming to an end in the Spring I feel very mindful that if at all possible, I don't want their knowledge, their local knowledge and the relationships that they've built to leave, you know, if a project is to continue I'd want to retain the skills and experience that they've developed. I do also think as well that they are cascading that to local people, they're cascading that to the leader of the [organisation name], they're cascading that to a little church group in [community name] and then whenever they meet someone new, so [community location] for example, they're saying well why don't you think about this or this has worked really well somewhere else...so I think there's lots of cross-pollination, both of learning and sharing locally... they've had a chance to visit other places outside of the area to go and see how they do it".

Advice organisations not funded by the pilot to attend Meeting Places do not consistently attend sessions, which hinders relationships.

"We had [support service] coming and again because they weren't maybe getting as many people speaking to them they decided that they weren't going to come back, so I tried to negotiate them coming say once a month but they were like "yeah, it's just not worth our while"; so I guess its people's time isn't it? That's always a barrier in developing something".

If organisations beyond Citizens Advice Cheshire West had funding to pilot advice provision in community venues, they might also shift their strategy along similar lines to Citizens Advice.

Manging the COVID-19 pandemic and opening safely.

A challenge is the limits placed on Meeting Places during the COVID-19 pandemic and how and when Meeting Places will be able to reopen safely.

"It's difficult because we had such good plans in place...with where we wanted to move on with things, and I think COVID in some ways has accelerated some of the stuff like more new hubs but it stops such a lot of stuff as well".

"I want to be able to pick back up again, because the guys there are so keen, whether they're volunteers that live in the community, whether it's the staff from there, or their area manager, they're so keen to do so much more in that building, they really want it to be used as a community space".

Partner organisations continue to be regularly in touch during the pandemic, and in some cases have provided collective emails to local areas to offer advice appointments.

“We’re all regrouping...we’re all finding different ways of working. So [community venue] opened again in the last couple of weeks, you can come in the back door, you can get the food, and go out the front door, but they, you know, they want to have a marquee outside with, you know, tea and coffee, obviously it’s going to have to be within all the restrictions that are in at the moment. But that need is still there and it’s an even greater need now. But also, because of the work we’ve done, they [the venue] are really keen to have us still involved”.

Meeting Place partners have utilised technology to offer people advice. Advice has been provided over the phone via a referral and the advisor calling the person. Communal phones have been set up outside community venues with three pre-set numbers to local advice lines.

“Sometimes picking up a phone is a barrier to people accessing advice isn’t it, so if we are able to do something that enables us to phone them, and they’re able to get that support then that’s, good for now”.

Advisors have also provided advice in jobcentres when the restrictions have allowed those venues to be open.

A delivery service has also been set up to provide food for people who cannot safely travel to a collection point.

Partners also identified that the partnership gave them strength and resources to collectively work out how they will resume Meeting Places when it is safe to reopen following COVID-19.

“One of the really good things is those strong relationships between all the partners and the agencies, and going forward it’s kind of getting all those people together and saying “right, how are we going to kind of I guess go forward?”

Meeting Place partners identified that a team approach with partners and guidance from the local authority would be key to overcoming this challenge.

Supporting people with economic and wellbeing issues post COVID-19.

Meeting Places also face the challenge of having the necessary resources to support people with economic and wellbeing issues post COVID-19.

“We’re going to see a whole new wave of clients that we’ve never met before... a tsunami happening... many people have just been getting by... okay, they’ve had issues, but... they’ve had an income coming in, and they have struggled, but they’ve managed to get through... there’s absolutely loads of redundancies now and these are people who’ve never been on benefits before, and they don’t know how to access any of that. The thought of ending up in a foodbank is going to absolutely blow their minds, it’s about, reassuring them and letting them know that that is okay and there is a welcoming environment there and, ‘Why don’t you access the foodbank and use that extra bit of money to pay for your rent”.

Meeting Place partners will collectively explore the needs of communities going forward, and partners organisations need to seek funding for meeting this challenge.

Capturing outcomes and collecting data

Capturing outcomes and collecting data to track developments are key challenges for Meeting Places.

Meeting Place partners explain that many of their actions do not result in immediate and clear outcomes; therefore, how successful Meeting Place is in supporting some people is difficult to track. Whilst the case of the vulnerable young male who had his food stolen shows a visible outcome of support others may be signposted to a session or other advisor, but the consequences of that signpost are unknown and difficult to track.

Meeting Place partners also identified the challenge of collecting data from vulnerable groups and people experiencing a crisis.

“It’s a hard thing to ask from people who’ve already been asked a lot of questions often before they come to a Meeting Place. They’ve been asked in every other agency and you don’t want to kind of pressure somebody into something but yeah, it’s always a challenge of trying to get data from somebody who’s living in poverty in a community setting, it often feels quite an uncomfortable thing to do or to figure out how to do it”.

“I think it would be hard to say how successful it is in providing those opportunities because we’re not deliberately measuring anything, you know, we’re not specifically measuring any kind of wellbeing or mental health measurements, for example”.

“I found that working with Poverty Truth Commission has been much more helpful with that because people have already kind of signed up, been given training and support through part of this kind of data collection and, you know, some of them have been to these Meeting Places, so that’s kind of helped with the situation of being inclusive and not exploiting or pressuring people to give data”.

The Beans on Toast focus group is a key resource for supporting the ethical collection of data from vulnerable people and people in poverty who have experience with foodbanks and Meeting Places and, therefore, monitor and evaluate impact.

Responding to a chronic crisis in a sustainable way

A key challenge is developing a sustainable response for a chronic crisis of insecurity in a sustainable way.

Meeting Place partners explain that many people are experiencing chronic crises of insecurity that cannot be fully addressed with advice and support.

“Most of the people that we are seeing it’s not like oh my fridge freezers broke this month, I need to pay out for that, and I need foodbank, it’s actually a case of they’re not getting enough money to survive on and therefore they need to rely on foodbank every month”.

“The issue is, especially with Universal Credit, that someone can see an advisor, have all their income checked and their income is assessed as right but it’s not enough to live on so actually in practice it’s wrong”.

“It really gets my goat, the fact that the government says you need this amount to live on, when nobody ever gets that full amount because it doesn’t take into consideration any debts they’ve got before they even go on Universal Credit, never mind the debt they put themselves to go on Universal Credit because they’ve taken that initial payment, it doesn’t take into account that you’re living in a property where the Housing Benefit doesn’t cover the whole rent and therefore you’ve got to take money out of your Universal Credit money to pay the excess on the rent, it’s not fit for purpose. So those kinds of people, people in those situations are never going to need foodbank, because they’re always going to be short”.

“For some people it might be a bit of budgeting advice and not just budgeting but like that that kind of like Eat Well for Less kind of mindset, where there’s like okay if you buy this, if you batch cook that, if you shop there for this, support, might help some people through. However, obviously the campaigning side of it I think is an area we need to work on as well, because actually for some people then no matter how much support and help you give them will never get out of food support without change in policy”.

As welfare policies require people to depend on community food support for an extended period, Meeting Place partners are battling with the need to balance creating a sustainable concept whilst also campaigning for policy changes. This can be a significant challenge. As the Meeting Place concept relies upon funding for staffing costs, and as collecting data ethically from people in crisis can be difficult, this could be a pivotal challenge.

Utilising waste in a way that aligns with principles

It is challenging to utilise waste food in ways that align with the Promote Dignity in Practices principle.

A significant issue identified with the use of waste is the tension between upholding dignity in practices, whilst using waste food to address poverty. It was determined by some partners and Beans on Toast group members that it can be more challenging to make a decent meal using the content of waste-based food parcels.

Cooking with waste food and eating it collectively is more dignifying than a person who does not need it giving it someone else who does need it as a food parcel.

There was a strong preference for greater fresh produce that can contribute to a decent meal for someone, which included a set of complementary food items.

Practical challenges with waste food were also identified by Meeting Place partners, such as the availability of waste food when there are other social supermarkets, the unpredictable content when using waste food distribution services, the pressure to collect waste food quickly and at night causing issues with staff and volunteer availability for this task.

Areas for Exploration

Further fostering of dignified practices

A key area for further exploration is how to continue fostering dignified practices, with a focus on the areas of food provision and work.

Dignity and food provision

“We’ve got to keep being as progressive as possible to really dig into what is a dignified food provision for someone on a low income. And not just dignified but healthy and balanced and back to some of our thinking with the Poverty Truth Commission that allows people to make a decent meal, that’s going to fill them up, that’s going to raise their spirits, that’s going to give them energy for everything else that they’re facing in their life and not be another knock, oh right, well you’ve got spaghetti in a tin, you know, it’s going to build them up rather than knock them down.”

“I think we should be thinking more about kind of more fresh fruit and vegetables wherever we can.”

Dignity and work

Beans on Toast group members spoke of a will to support community food providers through work and volunteering opportunities but highlighted the barrier of the cost of travel.

There is a will to explore how to create voluntary roles and paid roles with training and mentoring within Meeting Places, for local people with lived experience of poverty. This is vital for promoting dignity, as well as ensuring the sustainability of Meeting Places.

“We’ve got to be creating more paid work opportunities for people in their local communities, you know, to impart their lived experience but also to show people that if they really mean business when they’re talking about job opportunities for people who are far away from the job market, we’ve got to show the way of how you do that well and how you support somebody who maybe on paper doesn’t look like they could do it but you give them a chance and because you recognise the added value in them being involved in it because they bring so much more than just the job role.”

“It’s about local people leading it, it’s about really meaningful volunteering opportunities for people...I think it’s a job for everyone...it could be for confidence building, it could be food hygiene.”

“Activities at our sessions enable people to grow in confidence, to learn new skills, maybe even do a work placement at some of our sessions, so that by doing all of those things and by working in partnership with those agencies that are involved in our foodbank sessions, we’re treating the person as a whole, and not just focused on the food aspect.”

“We want to start really upskilling people, not just young people, it could be any age. Even the volunteers at foodbank as well, if they wanted to come and join us, or get stuck in the kitchen, we could upskill those people too.”

“We want to upskill local people to deliver pop-up cooking.”

How can Meeting Place partners support local people to host activities in a Meeting Place?

- A partner organisation could initially explore the costs of training and apprenticeships for people with lived experience, before recruiting qualified or experienced others.
- A Meeting Place partners could work with the Poverty Truth Commission to develop a supportive mentoring scheme for people with lived experience of poverty.

Increasing engagement with advice offer in Meeting Places

A comparative analysis of the total number of people provided with emergency food via vouchers to the number of people who benefitted i.e. household size, indicates that a key area for development is increasing the proportion of people who access emergency food provision in Meeting Places accessing advice.

A key area of exploration is assessing whether more intense development work on implementing Meeting Place principles, in particular being relational and the three key factors to building lasting relationships between Meeting Place partners and people experiencing food insecurity, impact the number of people who access emergency food provision in Meeting Places accessing advice.

The Meeting Places Progress Reporting tool can be used to evaluate and monitor the progress of Meeting Place development over time and identify areas for growth and best practice. The annual data on provision of emergency food and number of households benefitting from advice can be compared to monitor progress towards increasing the number of people who access emergency food provision in Meeting Places accessing advice.

Supporting local farmers

There is a commitment to exploring how community food providers can access the necessary funds to offer local fresh fruit, vegetables and eggs to people who visit Meeting Places. This offers strategic opportunities to support local farmers through community food provision

This is to be explored through the Feeding West Cheshire strategy.

Meeting Places as social enterprises

To support the sustainability of Meeting Places, the Feeding West Cheshire strategy shows an interest in piloting Meeting Places as social enterprises. This could involve selling fruit and vegetables, a profitable café, cooking lessons, and ‘a pay what you can for others’ concept. It is believed that the opportunity to pay something for food could also support dignity.

The social enterprise concept could explore asking local employers to fund fruit and vegetable boxes free or at low cost to their staff, and purchasing them from the local Meeting to subsidise costs for those in the community experiencing poverty.

This could be part of a wider movement to encourage employers to support sustainable and healthy food options for people.

“It’s for everybody, it doesn’t matter whether somebody’s a director or if somebody’s a cleaner within that organisation they all pay a pound and their perk is fruit and veg from their employer on a Friday. They may then choose to share that food with a neighbour or cook new meals with different ingredients.”

Another option is that people could volunteer to support the stall and receive a vegetable box in return.

“To a degree, it would be really good if there was some charging for food that was available, so people have the dignity of paying for something and not being given it for free or volunteering for it, or something in exchange for so that it’s not a handout.”

A low-cost fruit and vegetable offer could be trialled in communities that do not already have this provision from a shop, and have a high prevalence of high-priced fruit and vegetables and low-priced unhealthy food takeaway outlets.

“Many of the most areas of deprivation have got high priced food, only high-priced food on their doorstep, particularly very expensive fresh fruit and vegetables that you can only buy in prepacked bags so if you want one carrot you have to have twenty and it might cost you £1.50 rather than two carrots costing you 15p.”

“What can we do about making good affordable food available to people in Council estates that have probably just got a McColl’s on the corner and they might not be able to get out and for me there is a challenge, I don’t always want that to be surplus food because sometimes it’s the end of a date life that means that there’s a bit of a risk involved with taking that food, sometimes it can feel like you’ve got the dregs...I would like to see us being much more progressive in that area, kind of as the next year goes on, that we can hand on our heart say, yes, we are giving emergency food out, yes that is an offer but actually...many people need a longer term, more affordable avenue but also gives them a sense of satisfaction by being able to pay for it and a sense of purpose in doing so. And I think they’re different, they’re not the same. I think Meeting Places can offer both.”

Beans on Toast group members also highlighted the value of a ‘pay what you can’ system, helping them feel as though they have contributed and can help others “when they are back on their feet.”

Beans on Toast group members also spoke of monetary donations and food vouchers in addition to food donations, allowing people to choose their own food.

Implementing Meeting Places across the borough

Through the Feeding West Cheshire strategy, Welcome Network community development work, and more broadly through the Citizens Advice Cheshire West change in strategic direction, Meeting Place’s principles could be implemented across Cheshire West and Chester. Greater collaboration between West Cheshire Foodbank and Mid Cheshire Foodbank, facilitated by Welcome Network, could focus around sharing learning and best practice.

“I would like to see the next phase of this project to be a roll-out of Meeting Places across the whole borough, so be that working more in partnerships in other community venues or a mobile Meeting Place, I'd like to see the next phase of this, of the project to be an enhancement or more places offering this.”

The Meeting Place principles could be used to establish a Feeding West Cheshire kitemark to support high-quality provision by community food providers across the borough.

Partnering with community mental health support providers

Partners frequently identify mental health and wellbeing as a key issue for many people who attend Meeting Places.

“Just by gut reaction, there is an awful lot of mental health issues, and there doesn't seem to be an awful lot of support there...But mental health, we really struggled to get a team in for that, and that's not because, I mean, they're brilliant, the mental health team, but it's accessing them, isn't it? And it's also, you know, we're not experts in any of this, so, you know, I would say it's a massive issue and, yes, certainly, it definitely needs more development.”

“Mental health seems to be an enormous challenge for people.”

Partners felt that they had skills, expertise, and networks that can support wellbeing, but many people require greater support. The need to manage boundaries when supporting people with poor mental health is widely recognised by partners.

Meeting Place partners are committed to investing in mental health first aid training for all partners, and in some locations, partners already advertise mental health sessions and services to attendees: One Meeting Place also offers access to a charity providing counselling to families.

There is a commitment to exploring connections and potential partnerships with community mental health advisors.

“I'd love more conversations with Health, you know, not just grassroots providers who are providing mental health, I think we need to be much more joined up with the kind of strategic commissioning of mental health services, you know, social prescribers, wellbeing co-ordinators, counselling services, whatever that might be.”

“we are seeking for better connections with health providers so that if they are looking for opportunities to be more community focused they can come and bolt-on to what we're doing...if those people are all sat around the table, they could, you know, strategically think about how they could be much more grassroots, have a presence to make people aware of their services or offer them directly.”

The Feeding West Cheshire strategy has the potential to explore this issue through its relationship with Cheshire West Voluntary Action and the Council.

Options for supporting rural areas The concept of a mobile Meeting Place has been proposed as a way to support people living in rural areas, or large areas of housing distant from towns, with no community venues.

“We recognised that...actually if you’ve got a big family or you haven’t got money to get into town, that actually you’re unable to access emergency food, emergency advice, all of those things that we were trying to offer in these community venues, we were trying to take Meeting Places out into the community...But then there are communities that actually don’t have a space for us to do that, and actually they’re missing out.”

“It would be very beneficial for some of those rural areas as well, you know, places where people can’t get to advice or can’t get to emergency food, because it’s either in the town or the city.”

A mobile Meeting Place may be a bus, campervan, old mobile library van, or caravan, with an impromptu café providing emergency food, which is staffed by a project manager. An advice worker can work in a private room offering advice, and this setup can visit different communities without existing community venues.

“If it becomes a trusted bus with trusted people in it, and it could serve five communities in a week, or 10 communities in a week, you get much more reach of that advice on someone’s doorstep and ideally affordable food.”

Meeting Place partners identify several areas that would need to be explored to develop a greater understanding about the viability and value of a mobile meeting place:

- Relevant legislation
- Insurance and parking policies
- Vehicle management policies and procedures
- Risk assessments
- Renovation including electric and water facilities
- Funding for a project manager to be employed by a partner organisation with appropriate skills and experience of community vehicle infrastructure.
- Potential COVID-19 restrictions

Another key area for exploration is how trust and community engagement could be developed with a mobile Meeting Place.

“Groups need to feel an ownership of the development of this because otherwise no-one will go on it. Or you need to get the bus and find a creative way for a toddler group to be hosted on it or Mary from down the road, she’s going to sell cakes on it, you need to find a creative way to hook people in so that they feel like they own it, whichever place it rocks up to or there needs to be enough of a hook, like a pound for a bag of fruit and veg and actually that’s a real hook because the local supermarket don’t sell it or the newsagents.”

“You’d need to have a group on the ground in each local community stop off who were owning it, promoting it, saying come along.”

It is recommended that Meeting Place partners attend any Feeding Britain pilots that have utilised community vehicles, in order to share learning and ideas, for example, the Wandsworth food bus to explore the viability and value of a mobile Meeting Place.

Developing campaigning infrastructure.

The Beans on Toast focus group has the potential to be an ongoing entity to support community food providers in the borough to reflect upon practice and propose and campaign for change locally and nationally.

Following participation in the evaluation of Meeting Places, the group has also held an online roundtable with local community food providers to identify their priorities for development work and change.

Going forward, the group can review proposals for development work from community food providers evaluate practices from a user perspective, and utilise their lived experience to inform strategy.

Opportunities to engage in policy calls with national organisations are shared with group members. One member has taken an opportunity to advise a national food support charity on utilising lived experience to inform strategy, and one member has become a trustee of Mid-Cheshire Foodbank.

The group is currently supported by a staff member representing the Poverty Truth Commission, and the evaluator, and it will likely require funding to support its sustainability.

Part Four:

Transferability and Setting up a Meeting Place

Transferability

At its core, the Meeting Place concept is a set of principles that can be implemented across a broad spectrum of community food provision projects. The pilot began with the limited principles of accessible advice in a trusted community venue. Through operationalising the pilot Meeting place partners, supported by the transparency and flexibility of the funder, they have co-developed an array of valuable Meeting Place principles.

By seeking additional funding, learning from the initial pilot has already informed the development of Meeting Places in other areas in the borough. Additionally, the development of the principles has been used to inform broader strategies of partner organisations, the Feeding West Cheshire strategy, and the development of different community initiatives, such as offering advice in schools and the option to offer mobile support services such as fruit and vegetable provision.

“We’ve been able to use learning from one part of this pilot and translate it into other areas, different initiatives, geographical locations and strategies.”

For example, a Meeting Place could be replicated in a social supermarket; the two concepts are compatible.

“Social supermarkets could work but they need the principles of a Meeting Place too. They need the relational support network and advice to help as much as possible with the insecurity issue.”

The concept is transferable as opposed to replicable, as a principle of Meeting Places is to adapt. They are evolving and adapting entities underpinned by shared principles to reflect and meet the specific community’s needs and conditions.

The pilot found that replicating a set of standardised conditions did not work. In some cases, Meeting Place partners created very similar conditions across two community venues in short physical distance to one another, and in one location people engaged with advice provision whilst in the other people did not.

Importantly, whilst guidance is provided for setting up a Meeting Place, threaded through that guidance is the importance of adaptability and tailoring the Meeting Place to the community.

“You have to recognise that you’ve got to try and adapt concepts and change concepts and do things differently to see what works for that community.”

“It’s also about not giving up, it’s about just because one thing doesn’t work in one road in one community, it might be that there’s another building that might, you know, another venue that might work, so yes, it’s one of those things where I think it’s you’ve got to work with the community to try and find the best building or the best venues but then not give up if one doesn’t work.”

"I think for us it's about taking the principles rather than a concept to copy. So, one might have a social supermarket and the rest might not but that's okay, but the principle is that there's more than food, the principle is that it's about mental health and wellbeing and the principle is about advice being accessible, and another principle might be dignity, but it will look very differently in different places."

Guidance for Setting Up a Meeting Place

Here is staged guidance for utilising the principles of Meeting Places to reflect and meet the needs and conditions of a community.

1. Gentle opening chats in communities

For both the transition of existing traditional foodbank distribution sessions and the creation of fully new Meeting Places, a starting point for transferring the Meeting Place principles into practice is a gentle chat with volunteers and wider communities.

"First of all, it was a very sort of soft start, if you like. We went in and literally just sat and had a chat with people. We started with [foodbank distribution] and then we went up to [foodbank distribution session] and we sat with the volunteers. And we were very mindful...not to go in all guns blazing, really. And then we got the volunteers on board by explaining what the project was, which was actually quite difficult to explain to start with, but once we got it into practise people started to realise that it was a good service. And it was quite easy to promote for us because, really, we were going in and saying, "Here's what we can do to help you to volunteer."

"it's about your approach, so it's about not going in, "This is what we're going to do, we need to achieve this", it's about going in, you know, in a very gentle way, really, and saying to them, "What a brilliant set-up it is, you know. And would it be useful to you to have this as well? And offering them something, they're really up against it, they've got a lot on and the last thing they need is someone else coming in and asking them something else to do. So, we're achieving objectives that they don't even know that we're doing, and reporting on them, and they don't need to know all of that unless they, you know, obviously we tell them how great things are. But it's about not going in in a sort of heavy-handed way with a whole list of objectives and, 'This is what we're going to do, because... it's about understanding how that already works. And it's about what you can do to enhance it, not to take over."

"I think the first thing is actually getting the trust of different organisations to develop the Meeting Places. I think that is hard and not only the trust of the organisations but the trust of the community because it doesn't happen overnight...its always been a slow start."

2. Visit other projects

Meeting Place partners identified that for some, the Meeting Places concept could be too abstract for others to envision and implement, and advocated visits to other projects to develop understanding.

"Yeah, it's quite hard to explain, describe it, really, until you actually see it in practise. Then think, it's actually quite simple."

"I think speaking to other agencies and finding out what other people have done in the past as well. I also visited a few places...at different stages of development. Because I went up to [community venue] just to see how it run as well, first. To see like if it was possible for [community location] to do something like this. Because we've got the space, we've got the capacity so, could we do it."

It would be valuable to arrange visiting days and roundtables between Meeting Place partners, Beans on Toast group, and others interested in the Meeting Place concept in a post-pandemic context.

3. Build up an appropriate network

Build up a network of people and partners committed to principles and expertise that reflects the need and conditions of the community.

It is advised that the network includes local residents to secure local engagement, understand the needs of the community, and support the sustainability of the Meeting Place.

"I think it's also about local people...you could have a group of people who rock up in someone's front room or you could have a group of people who are at the local church or go on a walk together or run the allotments together, there needs to be a starting point, you need to find key people, they might be linked to a building or they might just be linked to other people but there has to be a willingness on the ground for people to want this because if they don't you're parachuting in...you do need the local people, whether that be the head of a PTA, somebody on the Parish Council.

"Local people have already got to be kind of connected or have an existing relationship or willingness to work together."

"They're already the trusted people within those spaces and those areas."

"Find out the interests of people in your community, like you might have somebody that's a really keen gardener, utilise that, or you might have somebody that's really keen on cooking, utilise that. How you can best utilise the skillset of the people that you've got around you?"

"The sustainability of some of the Meeting Places will only be there if you've got local people who are really wanting it...They don't necessarily have to deliver at it, although that's great if it's a volunteering opportunity for local people but it's the word of mouth that says, oh yeah, it's alright you know, good to go there, let's hang out there together."

The network must include partner organisations to be able to support understanding of needs and conditions of the community, provide essential skills and expertise, and share responsibilities and resources.

"I think the most important thing is building up that network of relationships and partners, and finding out what is available, identifying gaps, but then also identifying people that can fill those gaps, and you can only do that by getting out and talking to people, whether it be agencies, whether it be other community groups, finding out what's going on, because there's so much going on that when you live in a place that you are not aware of, and I think that that is the biggest thing, and then once you've got kind of a network in place you know who you can go to for such and such, you know, whether it be food, whether it be clothing, whether it be advice, it's building those relationships."

“it might be a Children’s Centre, it might be a project officer, it might be a localities manager and that’s good as well, I think if you’ve got some people who can be doers and whose paid job it is to draw alongside those people that’s also good, I mean it could be a vicar, it could be so many different types of people... I think where we’ve seen it work well we’ve got the people. But also, those people need to be supported, you can’t just... I think sometimes things don’t happen because there isn’t a convener who can see, rise above the delivery on the ground and can see some of the potential for synergies and collaboration.”

“I think setting up was, it was a bit bumpy but we got there. It was just making sure that we didn’t duplicate anything and we did have the right people coming in. But also, the right people for the people walking through the door. Because it’s OK putting a load of people in a room, saying, “We can help with this, this and this.” But if that’s not what people need, then there’s no point in really. Yeah, so it’s making sure that you’ve got the right people who know.”

“The community café’s available, the community laundry is available, you know, the foodbank is there, Citizens Advice is there, you know, and maybe the debt advisor was there, free tea and coffee, toys for children, you know, there could be multiple different reasons of why you’ve come and may involve lots of different partners. The key to success has been the momentum that multiple partners bring because if one of those, you know, say the toys couldn’t be put out for the children or actually, you know, Citizens Advice is on holiday, the whole thing doesn’t fall apart, it is still there, it is still a place where there’s lots on offer, so I think you need the range of services and the range of activities but you also need the range of humans to get the momentum.”

“In a sector that is decimated for funding there will not be one organisation that can do all of this, categorically there isn’t, so you have to rely on the strengths of the small amount that everybody can do.”

Crucially, the network must share a commitment to the full array of Meeting Place principles for a project to proceed.

“A common goal is very important. You get a sense quite quickly when people aren’t on the same path as you and that was quite obvious... And it’s not a criticism, it’s just true.”

“People had a plan for what they thought was needed in that space without necessarily being open fully at that time to what the learning had been in the spaces nearby it and they had a pre-set plan from another area that they thought that needed without knowing and understanding perhaps that area’s geographical needs or local needs.”

“They had a goal and they wanted to do it and didn’t really want to get involved in the wider issues, you know, or the wider perspective or a wider partnership... and then to that end it just doesn’t really lend itself for a collaborated meeting place.”

“A big barrier is not having local partners who are on the same page as you, so you might have a Citizens Advice, you might have a foodbank, you might have a debt advice and you might have a baby items bank but those people might not be partnership orientated, you know, if we tried to do this with some people that we know who aren’t say partnership orientated, it wouldn’t have worked, you need to have people signed up to the principles but you also need... You need the people with the principles.”

“There wasn’t a connection. When we started the conversations with [community group] we were looking to kind of add in all the things that were part of a Meeting Place...we would have wanted to ensure there was dignity, we would have wanted to ensure that there was advice and support and I mean, the simplest way to describe it...was that they wanted the funding but they didn’t want the partnership.”

“Sometimes the projects that don’t work out help you to, or don’t work out yet, help you to learn what your boundaries and what your principles are.”

“It’s great because we haven’t got anybody that’s set in their ways, that’s got to have some sort of certain way of working, because it would just go flat on its face, to be honest.”

“Everyone’s personal ethos has to be in the right direction.”

It is then advised that a working group of residents and partners is coordinated to co-develop the Meeting Place.

“We have a group of agencies, residents and partners who kind of come round the table to discuss what’s happening in [community name] and [community venue] and what we’re doing, and there was also a kind of strategic group too...its just getting those people in a room together and having those discussions with everyone because everyone was kind of working a little bit in silo, a little bit individually, so it’s just getting everyone together. And also, equally seeing how they all work together, so how important what they’re doing is and influences everyone else’s part in that story.”

It is also important to recognise when the timing is not right for a community to develop a Meeting Place.

“It just 100% was not the right timing for this particular pilot, they were not there are their journey, they were not ready to be partners...but that’s the joy of the wider Welcome Network is that you can say, do you know this isn’t the right time, let’s put it towards a resource that is the right time but we will keep this warm and it’s not to say that it’s not right for funding support and wider being a part of things in the future.”

4. Identify a trusted community venue

Meeting Place partners identify the importance of an inclusive, trusted, local community venue for Meeting Places.

“A venue is a big thing, you need the right venue.”

“You’ve got a venue which is a really good venue, and I think that’s makes for a lot, there’s a lot going on in that venue already and [name of venue lead] is very open to having us there.”

The venue must be associated with being a place of support and socialising instead of appearing official, like an office, or attendance being required, such as a Work Zone.

5. Secure necessary funding

Key to setting up a Meeting Place is having a partner who can attain and manage funding, and a funded facilitator and advisors because it supports the development, consistency and sustainability of Meeting Places.

“Finding somebody that could help you with funding is key, so I do think we do need some money for these projects, whether it be to buy ingredients so you can cook stuff, or you know, provide some cups for a venue.”

“If you’re getting to that level definitely, so I do think funding’s important, to have somebody in place that can sort out funding, because you know, to get a food hygiene certificate so you can do meals, or a first aid course so that you’ve got a first aider on site, you know, that’s all these little things that you can take for granted when stuff is already kind of partly set up, or fully set up.”

6. Adapt continuously

As Meeting places should adapt they must continue developing and growing over time, trialling ideas, and striving to meet the community’s needs informed by feedback, expertise, and ongoing learning of best practice.

“There isn’t one size fits all, there are different geographies, there are different personalities and there are different things that work or don’t work, so the reason why it’s important to pilot different things is that I think we can learn, we’re such a large and diverse borough that we can learn from what people are doing and take the things that are most relevant to other community hubs and this is a new space for everybody, I think we have to pilot it because it’s not easy.”

“Every community is different and you can have the principles stay the same but the way and the timing in which that evolves is very niche to that community and I think it’s taught me that you have to respect local people, you have to respect the local dynamics, whether that’s that they’ve had lots of professional support or no professional support, you have to respect what’s there and how people respond to kind of support or new services in their community, so I’ve definitely learnt that through this pilot. I think I’ve also learnt how important it is to stick to those principles and adapt practices with those principles in mind.”

“It’s when you give it a good try, six to eight weeks, and then you can say, you know, ‘Well, we can change the time,’ and you make sure that you promote that properly...and you can try it a different way, and work with the staff there and then actually figure out that’s not what’s needed and you realise someone is missing out so you change.”

In the original pilot plan there was an intention to pilot a social supermarket but through slow chats with communities, attempts to build networks, it was recognised that communities either had existing provision or needed a strong emphasis on advice in community settings; the pilot adapted.

“We thought actually, do you know, this [setting up a social supermarket] isn’t right and we relayed that back to the Big Lottery and through Feeding Britain. We now knew that there was very little in the way of community spaces and advice in [community name] so that was when Feeding Britain had a conversation with us about schools work and that was when we put in the suggestion that could we please, we feel that the best investment for this is to build upon the existing learning and to employ a schools’ worker.”

Part Five: Simple Tools to Evaluate and Monitor Progress and Impact, and Share Learning

Meeting Places Progress Reporting Tool

This tool has been designed to evaluate and monitor the progress of Meeting Place development over time and identify areas for growth and best practice to be shared.

To be undertaken at regular intervals to determine the degree of progress and areas for development.

To support comprehensive analysis in the report, Meeting Place partners to host regular staff and volunteer meetings to explore perceptions on principles, practice, achievements, challenges, and areas for development.

Name of Meeting Place:

Date:

Principle	Evaluation commentary	Rating Scale
Be Welcoming	<p>To what extent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are visitors welcomed at the entrance through signage and/or in person? • is it clear where people need to go in the building to access support? • is there a comfortable and welcoming place to sit for a while? • on arrival is there someone to chat to or an activity to take part in? • are people offered a drink and asked how they are? • does the meeting place support those with additional needs? • has everyone removed lanyards and admin desks? • are people welcome to attend from different areas? <p>What, if any, are the challenges to achieving this principle?</p> <p>Do you have any suggestions for how this challenge can be overcome?</p>	<p>0 - no evidence to support principle</p> <p>1 - limited evidence of principle or development towards principles</p> <p>2 - clear evidence of progress towards principle</p> <p>3 - meets principle</p> <p>4 - strongly satisfies principle</p> <p>5 - demonstrates principle in an exemplary way</p>

<p>Utilise a Trusted Community Venue</p>	<p>To what extent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is the Meeting Place located as close as possible to the people it aims to support? • is the Meeting Place located in a community venue people already attend out of choice? • Are there different spaces in the venue for varied activities? • are some staff and volunteers from the local area? <p>What, if any, are the challenges to achieving this principle?</p> <p>Do you have any suggestions for how this challenge can be overcome?</p>	
<p>Be Relational</p>	<p>To what extent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are staff and volunteers attending the Meeting Place on a regular basis? • do all staff and volunteers attend the session on the dates and times they advertise they will be available? • are staff relational or given training to support the development of appropriate skills? • are there activities for staff, volunteers and people who attend to take part in together? • is there a supportive network of partners effectively working together? <p>What, if any, are the challenges to achieving this principle?</p> <p>Do you have any suggestions for how this challenge can be overcome?</p>	

<p>Provide Accessible Advice</p>	<p>To what extent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are advisors available to support the range of issues experienced by people in food insecurity? • are people given the opportunity to get to know an adviser before discussing their issues? • do volunteers know the support services on offer both in the Meeting Place and local area? • is there a warm handover of a person between foodbank volunteers and specialist advisers? • do advisors have time for conversations to get to know people before they advise? • are there private spaces for confidential discussions? • are people able to meet with the same advisor on a regular basis? • are people able to instantly access specialist advice? <p>are people accessing the advice services on offer? What, if any, are the challenges to achieving this principle? Any suggestions for how this challenge can be overcome?</p>	
<p>Focus on Wellbeing</p>	<p>To what extent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are there activities that seek to have a positive impact on people’s wellbeing? • are there activities that support skills development and self-esteem? • are people encouraged to attend other activities in the venue or local area? • are there partnerships with community mental health providers? <p>What, if any, are the challenges to achieving this principle? Any suggestions for how this challenge can be overcome?</p>	

<p>Promote Dignity in Practices</p>	<p>To what extent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are people given a choice about the food they are given? • are people supported in influencing the development of the Meeting Place through feedback and decision making? • are people's skills utilised in a Meeting Place so that everyone is able to contribute? • are people treated as equals and valuable contributors? • are people with lived experience employed or volunteering through Meeting Places? <p>What, if any, are the challenges to achieving this principle?</p> <p>Any suggestions for how this challenge can be overcome?</p>	
<p>Share Food</p>	<p>To what extent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is there a food offer beyond emergency food bags? • are there activities related to food? • is food used as a social enabler? • can people share food? • are there activities designed around cooking and eating food? • is there an awareness and support of dietary requirements? • is local farmers' produce being used? <p>What, if any, are the challenges to achieving this principle?</p> <p>Any suggestions for how this challenge can be overcome?</p>	
<p>Adapt</p>	<p>To what extent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is the Meeting place reflecting and adapting to community needs? • is the Meeting Place under review? • a focus on development? <p>What, if any, are the challenges to achieving this principle?</p> <p>Any suggestions for how this challenge can be overcome?</p>	

Please identify any staff or volunteer training needs to support the journey towards Meeting Place principles:

Please identify any areas where funding could help progress development of this Meeting Place:

Any further comments:

To evaluate progress and monitor impact:

- Maintain and develop the Beans on Toast group to operate as an advisory board for community food providers.

As explained, the Beans on Toast focus group can be an ongoing entity to support community food providers in the borough, to reflect on practice, and propose and campaign for change locally and nationally.

The Beans on Toast focus group is a key resource for supporting the ethical collection of data from vulnerable people and people in poverty who have experience of foodbanks and Meeting Places.

The Beans on Toast group should be a developing entity. Whilst the original members are drawn from the Poverty Truth Commission's group of community inspirers, going forward, people who attend Meeting Places could be invited to become members of the Beans on Toast group sharing feedback on Meeting Places in a supported and consensual way.

The Beans on Toast group could meet at different community venues, with financial support for transport, and as co-researchers, with a qualified researcher, host focus groups with people who attend that Meeting Place to measure impact. Semi-structured discussions could have questions focused on gathering people's perspective on the extent to which principles are met, success is achieved, and areas for development.

To share learning

Create an online portfolio of case studies of Meeting Places, including images and videos showcasing the principles in action.

Meeting Place partners and Beans on Toast group to collaborate on creating informative, concise videos on each of the principles to be shown on websites and through social media pages.

Meeting Place partners and Beans on Toast group to host webinars sharing learning on development of principles and practice.

Beans on Toast group members also spoke of wanting to attend Meeting Places and have one-to-one conversations on what it is like to live in food insecurity and what it is like to support someone experiencing food insecurity to develop understanding and empathy.

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