Edinburgh Covid-19 Food Programme: Lessons Learned
EVOC, November 2020

EVOC worked in partnership with the City of Edinburgh Council and third sector organisations to support vulnerable people to access food and other critical support during the Covid-19 pandemic to date. The City of Edinburgh Council initially received £1.651m from the Scottish Government Food Fund to support food provision for vulnerable people in Edinburgh between April and September 2020. This investment included provision for direct payments for free school meals, provision of food boxes to families with vulnerable children and the payments made through EVOC to the Edinburgh Covid-19 Food Programme. This fund was depleted by mid-June at which time the Scottish Government announced further funding £0.986m for vulnerable groups and £0.603m for free school meals.

We are currently reviewing how to respond to a resurgence in the virus and the associated restrictions, and this work will undoubtedly continue to evolve. For now, this lessons learned process seeks to review some of the learning from the Edinburgh Covid-19 Food Programme. This report provides an overview of this partnership work and takes into account the views of representatives from City of Edinburgh Council, third sector food providers and community transport providers, Volunteer Edinburgh, community link workers and EVOC staff on the delivery of the programme. (See Appendix 1 for a full list of participants.)

The report does not include the voices of beneficiaries of the programme: this was a choice which we made during the development of this document for two reasons, the GDPR places certain restrictions upon our ability to approach people in this circumstance but more importantly we want to avoid any duplication with the work of the Poverty Commission. The Commission has established the citizen-led 'End Poverty Edinburgh' group – which will take forward the aims of the Commission and will be better placed to explore this area.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the last few months have tested us all in ways we could never have anticipated. We would like to thank all our partners, your volunteers, teams and boards, for the time and effort put in over the first six months of the pandemic. This is just the starting point of our journey as partners working closely together to both mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and more honestly acknowledge the joint challenges of food insecurity and health inequalities.

Key learning:

The learning from the programme ranged across a number of areas:

- The majority of the conversations/interviews with partners reflected upon the immediate term, local, operational detail of the programme and the practical relationship with EVOC and City of Edinburgh Council;
- Our own learning, guided by colleagues and partner interviews about the programme aims to look at what learning could be applied in the event that we need to start similar work again – either in the event of further immediate challenges to community resilience due to Covid-19 or other challenges which might arise – e.g. as a result of the UK's exit from the EU;

- Taking these together and looking forward, we have learning which aims to look at more strategic planning for the future – existing structural challenges such as food insecurity and health inequalities have been thrown into sharp focus since March. How can we work together to address these?

Immediate learning

- Operationally, the programme was task-intensive, with high-levels of reporting and very high numbers of referrals. In a future iteration of the programme, this should be streamlined – the quality and accuracy of information should be improved.
- In managing a response of this kind, EVOC as the managing agent and City of Edinburgh Council and Scottish Government as the funder need to ensure that there is clarity around a number of areas of governance. These include: guidance for partners; clarity about the level, timing and criteria for investment and decision-making.
- Specifically, there was a lack of clarity around the timeline for delivery of funding following announcements by Scottish Government – this was not clear to potential partners and should be communicated early. Funding routes should be as clear as possible – direct funding of the third sector by Scottish Government complicated the landscape.
- Guidance for the project should be concise, accessible and reviewed regularly. Any review should be proportionate and take into account the competing demands of process and delivery. This is coupled with the need for partners to carry out their own due diligence in ensuring that they understand the terms and conditions of any programme of investment.
- The timing for the start of the project had an impact on organisations' willingness and ability to engage with the project and its processes. In any future iteration, it would be expedient to have a general agreement in place ahead of any crisis.
- Improved communication to create awareness of the programme across statutory colleagues (e.g. individual schools, Children and Families Dept., Primary and Secondary Care and Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership) and our third sector colleagues, coupled with increased engagement from the beginning could inform a more collaborative programme.

In the event that we need to re-establish the programme

There are a number of potential challenges to community and individual resilience on the horizon. These include the potential for increased restrictions and /or high levels of redundancy due to Covid-19 and the potential impacts to supply chains as a result of the UK's exit from the EU. To mitigate against these EVOC will be starting a discussion about how to work together more closely and reduce the need to develop ad-hoc systems in a crisis.

- We will be working with City of Edinburgh Council to produce a Memorandum of Understanding which will establish shared expectations to improve how we work together and avoid some of the challenges that were presented during the first iteration of the programme.

- Alongside this – and recognising that partners have limited time – we will work to agree a proportionate, preparatory and provisional structure which can be delivered quickly. This will require that we re-engage communities in the process.
- While it is not possible to plan for all contingencies, this structure will aim to offer a level of transferability which will focus on community resilence and which can be rapidly deployed in a number of different circumstances.
- Reviews within the programme should include the suitability, choice and availability of food parcels as well as assessment of value for money and quality.

Future working

This was a collective response by the third sector to a crisis situation. We now have an opportunity to take our shared experiences and use them positively to create a city-wide plan for the end of persistent food insecurity. EVOC has an important role in bringing together the third and statutory sectors to make this a reality.

The Poverty Commission has recently published the actions it recommends to end poverty by 2030, this includes a cultural change that all of us who work within communities, be that through the statutory or third sectors, question how the work we do contributes to the reduction or eradication of poverty. The Commission also states that *"City of Edinburgh Council, EVOC and local organisations must continue to fund, co-ordinate and operate services to provide quality fresh food to citizens who experience food insecurity, avoiding a return to reliance on food banks. Our call to improve income security is key to replacing the need for food provision, combined with action to develop place-based approaches to bring together healthy eating, sustainability and community development."*

In order to take these points forward:

- Over the coming months we will bring together organisations across the city to analyse the current situation with respect to food poverty and insecurity, to better understand the activity that is being delivered to reduce food poverty, and identify gaps.

- Building on this, we need to support a short-term response to continuing challenges, but also to inform longer-term policies and practice regarding food poverty, health inequalities and community-led support.

We will be in touch with colleagues soon to take this work forward.

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1. Introduction

a) Background

Scotland went into lockdown on 23rd March 2020 in an attempt to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 across the country. This led to significant numbers of typically independent households being unable to provide for their most basic needs, food being the most obvious and immediate challenge. Organisations quickly recognised the health and wellbeing needs of their communities and re-directed their activities and services to provide support where it was needed most.

As part of a £350 million package of funding to support communities affected by Covid-19, Scottish Government allocated £70 million to a Food Fund to support households who may experience barriers in accessing food.[1] This was broken down into a number of different categories including those experiencing health barriers (shielded community, vulnerable households) and socio economic barriers (e.g. those financially at risk, people who are homeless).

While City of Edinburgh Council had the overall duty to deliver support for the shielded and vulnerable categories, there was a decision to work with voluntary organisations in Edinburgh to support the 'vulnerable household' category - i.e. those who were having to self-isolate; had underlying health conditions which made them vulnerable, or who were considered financially at risk due to Covid-19.

In the first iteration of the programme, City of Edinburgh Council offered an in-kind contribution which included the use of school buildings as local hubs and transport to support on-going operations. The use of schools as hubs was not taken up at the beginning of the programme as organisations already had established sites and basic delivery mechanisms. Transport was used widely by organisations.

In the second iteration of the programme, plans were already in place to restart schooling and a number of organisations had moved away from supporting the programme. At this time hubs became a more logical solution and we were able to engage a number of Day Care Services to offer this facility. This offered a more streamlined programme with a clear view of delivery in each locality.

b) Programme overview

There were two core strands to the work.

i) Supporting ongoing activity
Organisations who were already supporting people in their local communities to access food were able to claim funding to enable them to continue this ongoing work. This activity has been referred to within the programme as 'legacy' referrals to contrast with those received directly through the City of Edinburgh Council phoneline.

ii) New referrals via City of Edinburgh Council
Referrals were received via the City of Edinburgh Council's phoneline (which also received those via

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[1] https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-food-fund-guidance-to-local-authorities/pages/the-food-fund/

the national assistance helpline) and online form. The Council sent referrals twice daily to EVOC who took responsibility for them and referred them to a local provider for the following:
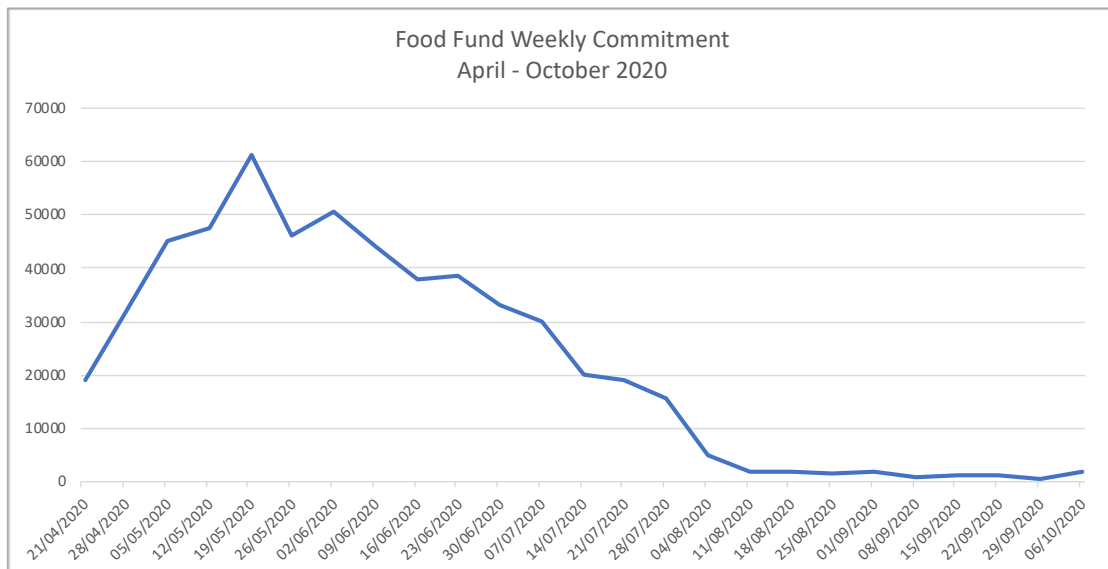
- The option of a standard food parcel (which typically contained a week's worth of provision for each individual in the household), or prepared meals.
- Basic baby, sanitary and pet food products if required.
- Support from a volunteer via Volunteer Edinburgh's Community Taskforce (e.g. for shopping assistance, dog walking etc.)
- Contact from a Primary Care Community Link Worker to help access broader practical and wellbeing support such as befriending, energy advice etc.
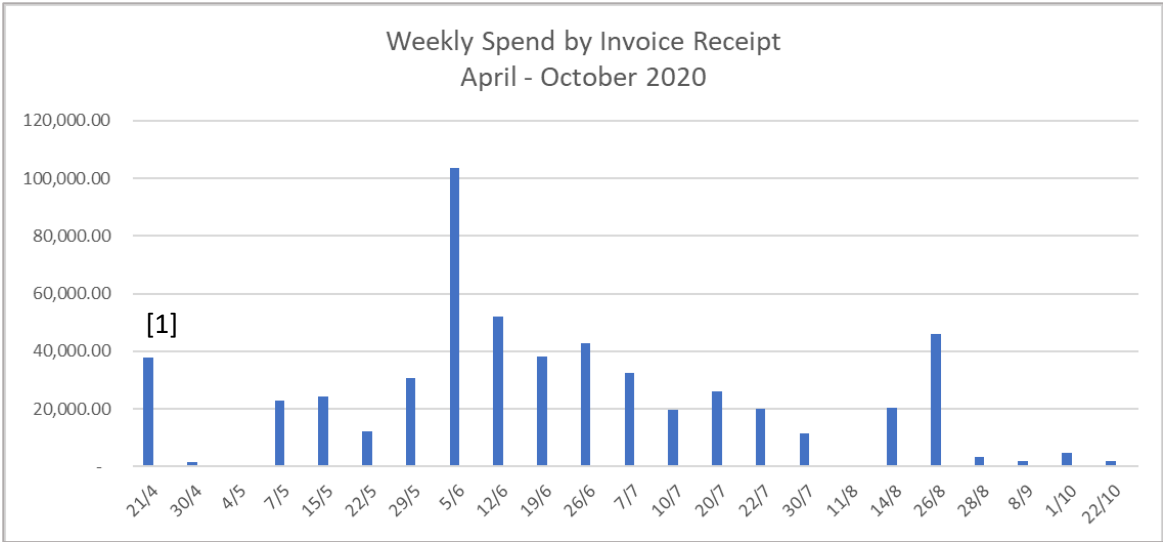
From July, the funding model for the project changed in an attempt to reduce duplication, begin to wind down the programme and ensure those fitting the funding criteria were prioritised. Funding was only therefore available to those coming via the Council's phoneline or online form.

c) Programme outputs

Over the course of the programme, EVOC oversaw the distribution of funds from Scottish Government to over 30 organisations and the project provided the equivalent of 25,000 weeks of shopping or prepared meals to people across Edinburgh.

During the first weeks of the programme there was significant growth to the numbers being supported through the 'legacy' referral route. This growth, from £19,085 in the first week to £61,171 in the fifth week, was far beyond expectation and when coupled with late invoices resulted in the programme being overspent much earlier than had been anticipated.

Food Fund Weekly Commitment
April - October 2020

Weekly Spend by Invoice Receipt
**April - October 2020**

[1]

[1]: there was a payment of £37,860.00 made to an organisation who had indicated that they were experiencing significant cash-flow problems before the programme started.

Our inability to record personal data across part of the programme also makes it difficult to offer clear outputs with regard to the numbers of people supported. Instead, we have been able to offer outputs in terms of the numbers of packages provided. Each package providing either: supplies for 1 week or ready meals for the same period.

By this measure, approximately 25,000 meal parcels were delivered during the period. In any future iteration of the programme, we would need to be very clear as to the numbers of people being supported at various stages of the programme.

Referrals directly through the City of Edinburgh Council phoneline are recorded – the chart below shows the number of people being referred through this route in each week of the programme.

Referral numbers by week
April to October 2020
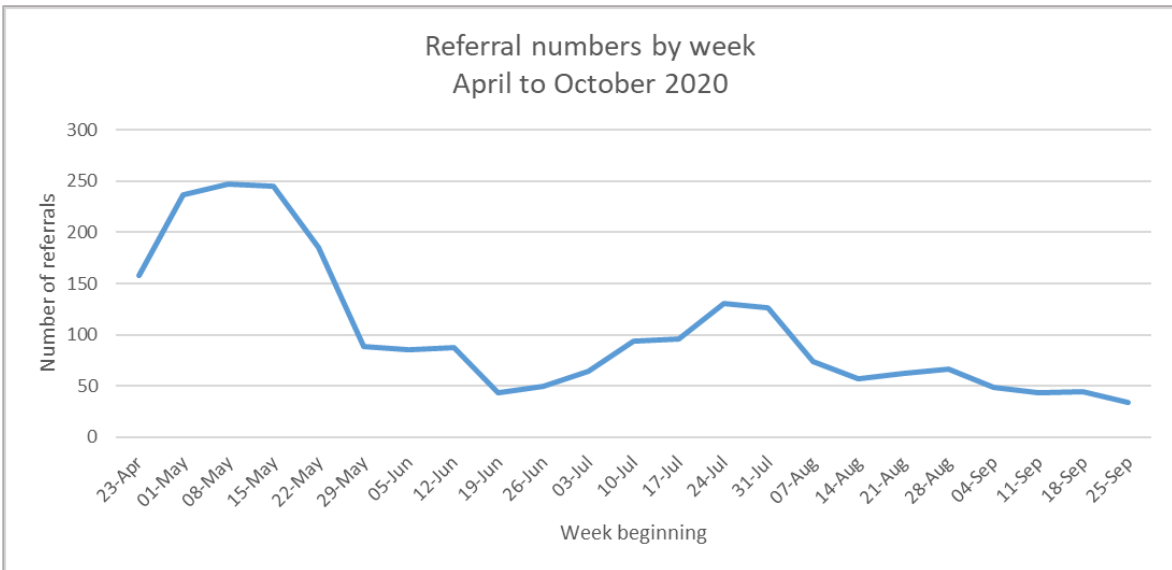
By this measure, a total of 2,373 referrals were received for food with a number of other people being referred for other support.

2. Strategic and governance learning

a) EVOC's role

The aim of the Edinburgh Covid-19 Food Programme was to bring together the statutory and third sectors with the aim of providing more universal access to basic food. EVOC was able to use its position as a partner within Edinburgh's Third Sector Interface and its existing, trusted relationships to provide a joined-up approach with a clear infrastructure which could also facilitate additional links – such as dog walking, support with shopping, befriending and wellbeing support.

Some organisations felt that EVOC's position between the Council and the individual organisations was unnecessarily bureaucratic and demonstrated a lack of trust. While some thought that the financial arrangements for the project provided much needed accountability, others felt strongly that the funding should have gone directly to them. However, the Council was clear that given the number of organisations involved, individual funding relationships would not have been viable, would have created additional complexity and that the working relationship with EVOC was a positive part of the programme.

Many organisations responded positively to EVOC reaching out to them. Some commented that this has resulted in much better working relationships, both with EVOC and with the other organisations involved. For many it was important to them that EVOC was making a concerted effort to find out about their existing work in the local communities they serve. Most felt that EVOC was responsive and proactive to queries.

> *"I knew of EVOC but had never worked with them – the bond between*
> *us and EVOC really made a positive working relationship"*

b) Funding

A number of third sector organisations had been able to mobilise very quickly, but the inevitable lag in response time for larger statutory organisations to formalise funding arrangements created a number of practical issues.

By the time the Food Fund was fully established many organisations had already been providing food and other support to their local residents for several weeks and had burned through their reserves. There was a potential risk to semi-rural areas of the city and other areas which are home to fewer organisations – which risked a postcode lottery for critical support. To mitigate this and achieve full coverage across the City, the programme needed to facilitate a city-wide system and develop a structure to take new referrals from the national assistance helpline (via the City of Edinburgh Council). However, in addition there needed to be a funding stream for 'legacy' referrals and the referral system needed to fit around the existing infrastructure of different local helplines etc.

There was a reported lack of clarity of communication from Scottish Government around the funding (this also applies to other funds announced at a similar time). Organisations being directly funded by Scottish Government also created complexity in terms of introducing different timescales and criteria. While recognising the pressures being faced, quicker clarity around the funding allocation and a clearer funding landscape would in future help align responses across the City.

c) Role of the third sector

The pandemic has put the third sector in the spotlight and campaigns like SCVO's **#nevermoreneeded** have drawn attention to the country's reliance on, often very small, organisations to support their local communities over the last six months. As one organisation commented:

> *"this has definitely raised our profile in the community in a positive way."*

In addition to the speed at which the programme needed to be set up, the changing circumstances during the programme also created challenges. Thanks to the flexibility of the wider third sector we were able to evolve the programme within the six month period, and transition a number of organisations into and out of the programme at various points.

Although it was an extremely challenging time for organisations, many welcomed the fact that they were trusted by the statutory sector to 'get on with it'. Some commented on the freedom they had to be more flexible in their operations and have described feeling more confident in their ability to adapt to change. As one organisation commented:

> *"the team is now far more willing and excited about trying new things.*
> *This has definitely changed the culture of our organisation".*

We do not yet have a comprehensive understanding of how local authorities across the country addressed food provision during the pandemic, although sharing these experiences may support future planning across the country. In Dundee, Faith in the Community Dundee brought together the Council, 24 local grassroots and community organisations and their local TSI to form the Food Insecurity Network. As in Edinburgh, this network provided food, sanitary items, and PPE, but also offered advice and support around funding and financial wellbeing. Through the National Voluntary Sector Resilience Forum, EVOC has been asked to carry out a piece of work to understand some of the practical challenges and to explore how collaboration could have been increased. We would also recommend that the Scottish Government and COSLA carry out a more detailed analysis of the various programmes across Scotland to ensure preparedness for any future challenge to resilience and which considered also value for money and achieving the best impact.

d) Governance and decision making

EVOC produced a Memorandum of Understanding[2] and Food Network Guidance document for all parties involved. The majority of organisations we spoke to who commented on these admitted that they did not read them in detail. Several organisations stated that guidance documents could have been simpler to ensure a better balance between following processes and focusing on delivery.

One of EVOC's core roles and a plank of our strategic plan is to provide leadership – including good governance. In the context of governance documents and the procedures in place for the programme, there is some clear learning for us to take forward. It is in the interest of everyone concerned that guidance be provided in as concise and accessible manner as possible. It is the role

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[2] https://www.evoc.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/media/2020/10/2020-MoU-Edinburgh-Food-Programme-Network.docx

of organisations accepting an investment from any fund to carry out their own due diligence and to gain clarity about any misunderstandings.

Decision making around the changes to the fund created significant challenges. One example was around the sharing of data. The original request from the Council was that identifying data for 'legacy' recipients – those who had been supported by organisations prior to the establishment of the formal programme - was to be shared and that all further requests should be directed via the helpline. A small number of providers were reluctant to share this data on the basis that this would make the service less accessible. Others objected to the idea that someone seeking support would be re-directed to another phone line, and that might lead to people not getting the support they needed. This position was represented by EVOC and the decision taken by the Council to not restrict the application of the Food Fund as originally anticipated, in the interests of improved and expedited access. However, this position changed by the end of June in the context of a concern that there might not be the resources to be able to support those for whom the fund had been established – those at risk as a result of Covid-19. To manage this risk, it was necessary to implement a more rigourous method of verification, which included eligibility checking via the City of Edinburgh Council phoneline.

Several organisations commented specifically on the change of funding model in June, which led to all requests for support for food going via the Council helpline. Some organisations had particular issues regarding this change:

> *"it was insensitive and implied that organisations were scamming the system.*

The working relationship between EVOC and the Council was positive and even when difficult decisions needed to be made, there was a shared approach taken which prioritised those most in need as a direct result of Covid-19.

Another issue was around the approach taken to communicate the need for further funding from Scottish Government. Some organisations expressed concern over EVOC's planned press release[3] and social media campaign about the funding situation. The pressing timescales had made the decision-making process more pressured and this was resolved through communications between EVOC and the organisations in question. Such issues could perhaps be avoided in future if clearer expectations and lines of responsibility around particular roles were established in advance.

e) Application of this model in future
The Food Fund project was a short-term solution to a critical situation and demonstrates our ability to mobilise quickly if faced with a similar scenario again. We are confident that the model could continue to evolve to respond to new and changing demands should it be needed but proportionate planning for this needs to take place. For future planning purposes it would be necessary to agree a plan which allows this flexibility, offers a clear plan to mobilise across the city and allows organisations the autonomy to respond immediately to community needs, within an agreed overarching framework to prevent the creation of complex pathways.

There is recognition from all parties involved in the project that food insecurity is an ongoing issue that pre-dates the Covid-19 pandemic and one which needs to be addressed urgently if we are to eradicate poverty in the city by 2030. The Edinburgh Poverty Commission's final report, 'A Just Capital: Actions to End Poverty in Edinburgh', recognises the successful partnership of the Food

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[3] https://www.evoc.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/media/2020/06/Food-Fund-press-release-11th-June-2020.pdf

Programme and calls on the Council, EVOC and local organisations to continue to find, co-ordinate and operate services to provide fresh food to people experiencing food insecurity but also identifies place-based approaches and bringing together healthy eating, sustainability and community development as potential solutions. Our learning from the Food Fund and from colleague organisations with significantly more experience than us in addressing food insecurity is that this will require a long-term, strategic solution which includes all partners to address the causes of food insecurity, with a recognition of the broad determinants of health inequalities including well-known structural problems such as the inverse care law, the attainment gap and digital exclusion.

The end of the Government's furlough scheme later this month and the continuous financial pressure on vulnerable households is likely to exacerbate these issues further as the longer-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic continue to hit the economy. The UK's imminent departure from the EU at the end of 2020 and the impact this may have on supply chains across the country also needs to be factored in to any discussions on tackling food insecurity.

3. Operational learning

a) Communication

During the first few weeks of the food fund project EVOC met regularly over Zoom with the organisations involved to learn what was going on at the time, and how that work could be supported. Some organisations found this level of contact overwhelming at the beginning, others felt that meetings would have been more effective on a one-to-one or locality basis. As one organisation commented:

> *"In hindsight, more localised meetings would have worked better than the big meetings involving everyone. This would have allowed for a better understanding of what was actually going on in different communities and the different skills that people have."*

However, a longer-term benefit of these larger meetings for some organisations is that they have become much more aware of other support across the city, which, in turn, has led to more collaboration and peer-to-peer support.

Some organisations also felt that there should have been a bigger effort to raise awareness of the project to other professionals, including social workers, GPs and organisations that support harder to reach groups.   Some organisations felt that professionals were referring their clients as a way of ensuring they were looked after, rather than due to a genuine assessment of food need. If professionals like GPs and social workers had a better understanding of the project's focus, the type of support available (including from community link workers and Volunteer Edinburgh) and a familiarity with the eligibility criteria, this would have helped reduce confusion for all parties.

b) Referral process

The main challenge for organisations regarding referrals was around the accuracy of information about the household. There was also a lot of confusion initially between vulnerable and shielding lists, with some people being in receipt of double provision. Some organisations expressed concern about the reasons for the referral; it was not always clear from the information provided why the

person was referred for help with food, or alternatively, the householder did not always understand why they were being referred. As one organisation commented:

"Sometimes I felt like the executioner when I questioned the validity of a referral."

The community link workers expressed concern that the referrals they received did not always include the right kind of information to support them with making follow-up calls. The direct impact of this was that they often had no idea what to expect when calling a householder, some of whom had complex needs or had experienced a recent traumatic event (e.g. death of a partner).

Some of the hub organisations questioned the need for a rolling 4-week referral cycle as they felt that this led to some people getting food for longer than needed, particularly given that the Council rang everyone who received food to ask them if they wanted to renew for another 4 weeks. Others thought that a 2-week cycle would have worked better (to reflect quarantine requirements).

"If you think about transmission/quarantine period of 14 days, it would have made more sense to have 2-week cycles and this would have made the money go further. It was probably about saving time, but it would be good to explore this as an option if we have another project like this."

From July, the referral cycle switched to a weekly system which organisations found easier to manage, although this coincided with a significant reduction in numbers as lockdown restrictions eased.

Some organisations became aware of significant levels of duplication, causing a lot of food wastage within the first few months of the project. Some attributed this partly to the reluctance of certain organisations to share the details of the clients they were supporting.

"There seemed to be so much food flying about, and it came across as an almost a race between organisations."

The security of personal data also emerged as an issue. Personal data was exchanged regularly in reports sent via email between the Council, EVOC, locality hubs and Volunteer Edinburgh allowing for a potentially large margin for error. EVOC introduced password protection security on all of its referral spreadsheets during the project as a direct response to this.

The reporting requirements were felt by some to be disproportionate, with a delivery date needed to be reported for each referral. In future, better alignment of software used to process referrals would reduce the burden associated with reporting.

c) Food provision

There were ongoing issues regarding consistency and value of some of the food parcels. Several organisations emphasised the importance of maintaining the dignity of those whom the project was supporting; they felt that the parcels did not always take sufficient account of people's dietary requirements or cooking ability. Some organisations felt that providing food parcels with contents based on defined meals removed independence and autonomy from the recipient. Householders did not have the flexibility to mix and match food parcels and prepared meals. For example, if someone chose the prepared meals option, this did not include essentials like bread and milk. We did explore offering a more integrated option – with a small number of prepared meals and some provisions and would seek to ensure that this was an option were the programme to restart.

d) Costs

Some organisations would have liked more clarification on meal and delivery costs and how these were calculated. As a result of feedback, EVOC implemented guidelines to allow organisations that provided and delivered food to claim £1.80 'per meal delivered' and which clearly demarked the cost of the meal at £1.50 and the cost of the delivery at £0.30. This was in order that all who were participating in the programme – for example community transport operators – were able to cover their costs.

The costing system created further confusion for those providing food parcels. While organisations recognised the 'price per meal' system would work for those providing prepared meals, they highlighted the difficulties in assessing the price per meal when creating food packs, with added complication coming from multiple person households.

Appendix 1: Methodology and list of participants

Roisin Hurst and Anna Telfer from EVOC undertook interviews throughout August and September with 26 participants from 16 organisations involved in the project. Interviews were conducted cross-sector, involving members from third sector organisations, community transport providers, food providers, staff from the City of Edinburgh Council, Volunteer Edinburgh, Community Link Worker leads and EVOC. Following a semi-structured format, the interviews took place informally via Zoom for up to an hour. See below for a full list of interview participants.

Our conversations with the participating organisations focused on two key aspects of the food fund project: firstly the governance and secondly the operational aspects of project delivery (i.e. communication and processes). We also asked organisations for their insights on the wider impact of the pandemic on the third sector.

This report is a summary of the findings and recommendations that have emerged from these conversations. EVOC will use these to support any future crisis intervention as well as long-term policy and practice regarding food poverty, health inequalities and community-led support.

Interview Participants

Name	Organisation
Maria Arnold	EVOC
Brenda Black	Edinburgh Community Food
Peter Carruthers	South Edinburgh Amenities Group
Deborah Clark	EVOC
Chrysa Demenega	Space
Jon Ferrer	City of Edinburgh Council
Marion Findlay	Volunteer Edinburgh
Ali Forbes	Food for Good Coalition
Stephanie-Anne Harris	Edinburgh Community Health Forum
Biddy Kelly	Fresh Start
Alison Leitch	EVOC
John Loughton	Scran Academy
Grace MacKenzie	Edinburgh Community Health Forum
David McConnell	City of Edinburgh Council
Crawford McGhie	City of Edinburgh Council
Liz McIntosh	Queensferry Churches' Care in the Community
Margaret Meechan	City of Edinburgh Council
Kellie Mercer	Caring in Craigmillar
Stef Milenkovic	EVOC
Karen Miller	Edinburgh Community Food
Anne Munro	Pilmeny Development Project
Carol Swan	Community One Stop Shop, Broomhouse
Helen Tait	Pilton Equalities Project
Jan-Bert Van den Berg	Art Link
Helene Van der Ploeg	Space
Heather Yang	Volunteer Edinburgh