Contradictions, dilemmas, views and motivations of volunteers in two community food support schemes in two London boroughs.

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Abstract

The voluntary and charitable sector is responsible for much food support in the UK, in the absence of direct government action. A rise in food insecurity (FI) places additional importance on the work of unpaid volunteers, instrumental in food support schemes. Their perceptions, views and experiences are essential contributors to maintaining and enhancing such provision. Semi-structured interviews were held with 51 volunteers at two food support schemes in neighbouring London boroughs. Most volunteers were white and middle-aged and almost half were in paid work. Generally high levels of empathy towards clients were expressed, although some were concerned about possible abuse of the support. Contradictory views were expressed in relation to both personal responsibility for FI and the pay-as-you-feel model; training on both is needed. Major motivators for involvement in volunteering were the perceived value of the work and alignment of projects with personal interests, skills and beliefs. Benefits were viewed as wider than solely nutritional. Ethical difficulties described included the appropriateness of using surplus food to address FI, allowing supermarkets to effectively 'greenwash' and failing to address underlying drivers of both FI and food overproduction. Volunteers were also concerned that their involvement allowed the government to abdicate responsibility.

Key words: volunteers; community food support; food insecurity; values; contradictions

Background: the UK context

Food insecurity (FI), defined as an inability to afford or access sufficient and nutritious foods at all times (FAO, 2023), is a key outcome of poverty (Power, 2023).

Food poverty *per se* is not the issue but it is driven by low income and/or inadequate levels of state support (Trussell Trust, 2021, 2022a; IFAN, 2023a).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 4% of UK households had very low levels of food security, an additional 4% had low levels, while 6% were marginally food secure (DWP, 2021). Since the pandemic levels of FI have been rising. The Food Foundation, as part of its on-going tracking of UK food insecurity, found that in June 2023, 17% of households had experienced it (Food Foundation, 2023a).

Regardless of how it is measured, the picture that emerges from recent surveys is that FI is rising and is not equally distributed throughout the population; low income, geographical location, non-white ethnicity, disability, families with children and being in receipt of Universal Credit (benefits) all increase risk (Food Foundation, 2023a; DEFRA, 2021; DWP, 2021, 2023a). The evidence for rising levels is also corroborated by the main food bank providers, the Trussell Trust, with an estimated 1300 food banks nationally as of March 2022 (Trussell Trust, 2022a), and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), which supports at least 1172 independent food banks (IFAN, 2023b). Within the UK there is an absence of direct government support for those suffering from FI. Instead, they have to rely on food support schemes organised and run primarily by the voluntary and charitable sector, largely staffed by volunteers, in what has been described as a 'pre-welfare system' (Harris, 2004; Power et al, 2017). There is no comprehensive overview of what is actually in place making true levels of provision difficult to ascertain, while food bank data inaccurately reflects need (DEFRA, 2021). Many eligible to use food support choose not to do so for a variety of reasons including stigma (Caplan, 2020; Middleton *et al.*, 2018; Garthwaite, 2016). Food support such as food banks is seen as a 'last resort', instead other avenues of help such as friends and families are used first (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017). Far from providing emergency, temporary support, as food banks are designed to do (Caplan, 2017; Loopstra, 2018), repeat use is common (Garrett, 2017) - greater need to support people long-term is apparent (Papargyropoulou *et al.*, 2022; IFAN, 2023a). This article aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on FI through focusing on the role of volunteers in food support schemes. Given the scale of FI in the UK and their importance in addressing it, it aims to explore volunteer experiences and perspectives. It will specifically focus on their motivations for volunteering, and their perspectives on clients, service provision and FI. It will include contradictory views held and the

implications for volunteer training. It will also outline the ethical dilemmas volunteers identified in directly engaging with different models of food provision, their implications and how they negotiated these challenges, adding nuance to our understanding of volunteers roles and experiences.

The importance of volunteers

In many ways, community food support schemes and their volunteers are part of an unofficial UK welfare system. Qualitative work by the FSA (2022) suggests that volunteers do not always welcome this, as they do not want community food provision to become normalised in response to FI. Food support schemes currently face multiple difficulties, including increased demand (Trussell Trust, 2022b; IFAN, 2023a), reduced food supplies and potentially fewer volunteers with the post-Covid return to work and the end of furlough (Ranta *et al.,* 2022).

Unpaid volunteers often deal directly with poverty and FI, interacting with and providing support for clients and, in some cases, themselves have relevant lived experience. Understanding their motivations for involvement in food support schemes, their views and experiences, and the dilemmas and contradictions they face, is thus important not only for how volunteers are recruited and retained, but also for the future of food support schemes. It is also important for understanding how FI has come to be addressed mainly through voluntary and unpaid labour rather than through government action.

The pandemic has had differential effects on volunteering. Some organisations reported having more volunteers, also more diversity (RVS, PPP and Stone King, 2021; Mulrooney *et al.,* 2023). Others suffered a reduction, often due to older volunteers needing to self-isolate (CPWOP, 2021). This differentially impacted the sector, some organisations thriving while others declined (CPWOP, 2022). Greater volunteer diversity increased access to a range of skills and beneficial business or public sector connections. For others, a reduction in volunteers, staff, income and schemes has had a profound and detrimental effect (CPWOP, 2022), with implications for their future viability.

Methods

Ethics & settings

Ethics approval for the work was granted by the University Faculty Ethics Committee as part of two larger projects, evaluating different community food support organisations and exploring FI (8th November 2021, reference 2786). A qualitative description approach (Moisey *et al.*, 2022; Bradshaw *et al.*, 2017), based on naturalistic inquiry (Armstrong, 2010; Sandelowski, 2000), was used. For context, each project is briefly described below.

Project 1: BRITE Box (Building Resilience in Todays Environment), Kingston-upon-Thames

The first project which started in April 2020, provided free weekly recipe boxes with pre-weighed ingredients during school terms to children and families. Recipes were designed to be nutritionally adequate, appropriate for children to cook with family members/carers, and culturally and/or nutritionally appropriate (e.g. vegetarian and gluten-free varieties available). Boxes were funded by grants and fundraising e.g. from local authorities. Decisions about which families received boxes were devolved to the schools; the organisation had no oversight of this. In most cases, recipients were low-income families (often, not always, a funding requirement). Foods used for the scheme were bought for this purpose primarily from local providers e.g. local greengrocers, butchers and supermarkets. The scheme was run by a paid manager. A team of volunteers was responsible for collecting, weighing and packaging foods, filling and sealing boxes for collection; sometimes, helping to buy ingredients and delivering boxes to schools. Since starting, the project has delivered 48,000 boxes and is now active in 7 London boroughs.

Project 2: The Real Junk Food Project (TRJFP), Richmond-upon-Thames

The second project, based in a neighbouring London borough, utilised food surplus to provide take-home foods and/or freshly prepared meals to clients at three sites. Food surplus was obtained from local supermarkets via schemes including Neighbourly and Fareshare, from local independent shops e.g. bakeries, from local allotments, and from a local homeless charity. This was supplemented with one-off food donations. Provision was site-specific, depending on facilities available. At one, a street pop-up food hub operated for one hour weekly, offering tinned and some fresh foods including bread and limited vegetables and fruit. At the second, a food hub and café offering freshly made soup operated for two hours weekly. At the third, a food hub

and café offering three course meals, smoothies and hot drinks, operated for two hours three times a week. All sites operated a pay-as-you-feel model, allowing clients to donate but without obligation to do so. Paid managers oversaw each site. Volunteer tasks included food preparation, unpacking, weighing food delivered and left over, collecting and delivering food, serving clients, setting up and cleaning up after service. The scheme, supplemented by client pay-as-you-feel donations, was mainly run with grant money allowing for premises rental, staff costs and where needed, purchase of core foods to supplement the donated surplus. Between June 2018-September 2023, the project saved an estimated 181 tonnes of food waste from landfill and fed 47,963 people. Between October 2022-September 2023, 740 volunteer hours/month were donated.

Data collection

Initial recruitment of volunteers was undertaken by the organisers of both projects. A list with the contact details of volunteers willing to be interviewed was supplied to the researchers, who then arranged interviews at mutually agreeable times. Interviews were carried out online or by telephone. Interviews at project 1 were carried out from 30/05/2022 - 28/06/2022; those at project 2 from 30/11/2022 - 20/03/2023.

Interviews

Interview guides, co-created with the food project organisers, were used for consistency. Semi-structured interviews, carried out by a single researcher (HM), were audio-recorded for accuracy with additional contemporaneous notes. Interview questions are shown in Table I; two additional questions (highlighted) were asked in project 2, at the request of the project organiser. Audio recordings were transcribed and basic thematic analysis (Saunders *et al*., 2023) carried out using an iterative process to identify the main themes and subthemes. These were manually coded (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and collated. Where quotes are used to demonstrate themes, pseudonyms are used for anonymity.

Volunteers also completed a short demographics questionnaire.

Table 1. Questions asked to volunteers within their interviews.

1. How long have you been involved with [food project]?
2. What do you typically do there? How often/how many hours do you spend on it?
3. How did you hear about it?
4. What are your reasons for involvement with it?
5. Are you involved in other non-food volunteering? If so, what?
6. Are you involved with other food aid initiatives? (if so, can you tell me about them?)
7. Were you involved with food aid work before the pandemic?
8. What do you gain from your involvement?
9. What is the value of [food project], in your opinion?
10. What do you think of the pay-as-you-feel model? How well do you think it works?
11. **What is your opinion of [food project] in relation to social inclusion?***
12. **How do you think [food project] may impact on the environment?***
13. What do you think are the main reasons for food poverty?
14. How would you like to see it addressed?
15. Is there anything else you would like to add?

*Additional questions for project 2

Data analysis

Demographics questionnaires were coded and data were entered manually into an Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft Corp.). Statistical analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS version 28 (IBM Corp.). Differences in levels of agreement with statements by demographic characteristics were assessed using Kruskal Wallis tests with posthoc Dunn's and Bonferroni correction. Differences in responses between venues were tested using chi square tests at $p < 0.05$.

Findings

Who were the volunteers?

In all, 51 volunteers across both projects (14 in project 1; 37 in project 2) were interviewed. The majority in both projects were female (70.1%) and white (92.2%). Most volunteers were aged 50-59 or ≥60 years (44.0% each). Most did not self-identify as having disability (94.1%). Over two thirds (68.6%) volunteered between 3-6 hours/week. Almost half also volunteered elsewhere. Nationally, levels of formal volunteering are similar in men and women, but women are more likely to regularly volunteer than men and appear more likely to volunteer with food support

organisations (Lee *et al.,* 2021). Formal volunteering is more common in white compared with other ethnic groups, and disability does not appear to be a barrier (NCVO, 2017). However, while nationally younger people (16-25 years) are most likely to both formally and informally volunteer regularly (NCVO, 2017), volunteers at food support schemes are typically older, and in many cases retirees (Lee *et al.,* 2021).

Over half (52.9%) were in paid work alongside their volunteering and 37% of those in paid work also volunteered elsewhere. There was no difference in the proportions of working volunteers by project (p=0.32). Working volunteers were significantly younger than non-working (p=0.001). There were no differences between working and non-working volunteers in relation to gender, ethnicity or disability status (Table 2).

Table 2: Age, gender & ethnicity characteristics of working and non-working volunteers. Data are expressed as numbers (%).

Age (yrs)						Statistical difference by working status
	<30	**30-39**	**40-49**	**50-59**	**≥60**	
Working volunteers (n=26)*	1 (3.8)	2 (7.7)	2 (7.7)	16 (61.5)	5 (19.2)	p=0.001
Non-working volunteers (n=24)	0 (0.0)	1 (4.2)	0 (0.0)	6 (25.0)	17 (70.8)	
Total (n=51)	1 (2.0)	3 (5.9)	2 (3.9)	22 (43.1)	22 (43.1)	
Gender						
			Woman		**Man**	
Working volunteers (n=27)			21 (77.8)		6 (22.2)	p=0.35
Non-working volunteers (n=24)			17 (70.8)		7 (29.2)	
Total (n=51)			38 (74.5)		13 (25.5)	
Ethnicity						
		Asian	**Black**	**Mixed**	**White**	
Working volunteers (n=27)		1 (3.7)	0 (0.0)	1 (3.7)	25 (92.6)	p=0.95
Non-working volunteers (n=24)		1 (4.2)	1 (4.2)	0 (0.0)	22 (91.7)	
Total (n=51)		2 (3.9)	1 (2.0)	1 (2.0)	47 (92.2)	
Do you consider yourself to have a disability?						
			Yes		**No**	p=0.39
Working volunteers (n=27)			1 (3.7)		26 (96.3)	
Non-working volunteers (n=24)			2 (8.3)		22 (91.7)	
Total (n=51)			3 (5.9)		48 (94.1)	

*1 participant did not state age.

Working volunteers volunteered less hours (1-2 hours/week) and were less likely to also volunteer elsewhere. Nationally those who work part-time especially <8 hours/week are most likely to have recently volunteered, while consistent volunteering was highest in retirees (McGarvey *et al*., 2019), unlike this study. Our findings indicate the importance of working volunteers. Their relatively high numbers might relate to a desire to continue practices adopted during the pandemic and/or to the importance they attach to food support schemes and community work. The findings also indicate the importance of and need to accommodate working volunteers.

Motivations for and benefits of volunteering

Volunteers had many laudable drivers for involvement but the benefits were by no means one-way; they themselves gained substantially. Engagement with specific projects was often through personal connections. Similar to national observations, many volunteered because they could, due to changed personal circumstances (e.g. retirement, redundancy or (during the pandemic) furlough). The pandemic also highlighted their relative privilege to some, leading them to try to help others, who they viewed as less fortunate:

> [Libby, project 1]: *'I became aware more than ever of how easy my life was and I thought 'no, I can help somebody. I **should** be helping somebody'.'*

> [Elsie, project 1]: *'It's lovely.. it's a privilege to have the time. I feel very fortunate and very lucky to do that'.*

However, what was meant as an act of generosity could also be viewed – perhaps experienced – as condescension, and some felt the need to clarify their intentions:

> [Carlotta, project 2]: *'I suppose there is a sense of giving back, because I'm lucky enough to live comfortably, but I don't mean I do it as a do-good thing, that's not quite where it comes from.'*

Beyond altruism, volunteers felt a personal need for self-fulfilment and self-worth, to which volunteering contributed:

> [Rosie, project 1]: *'I got involved was because I was looking for something to do.. something that was going to fulfil me'.*

> [Morven, project 1]: *'I find it very fulfilling to be honest, that this is going to benefit someone, knowing that I'm making a difference'.*

Local projects were convenient but the desire to contribute to and support their local community was also common. This desire to help their community was prevalent in the pandemic (CPWOP, 2021) and in volunteering more broadly (NCVO, 2017):

[Millie, project 2]: *'It was voluntary work and it was just around the corner from me. It was nice serving the customers and being local I often see them if I'm out and about and say hello'.*

[Sive, project 1]: *'A sense of helping the community. I feel like I'm doing something, I feel like I'm taking part in society'.*

Volunteers at both projects strongly valued their work; volunteering in projects aligned with personal values was common and contributed to their self-worth. In project 1, this was grounded in beliefs that the project helped with practical skills acquisition and resilience development, in addition to nutritional and financial benefits:

[Katie, project 1]: *'Something so worthwhile. I'm a teacher so the idea it was going out to families and children and the children were being taught to cook as part of it, particularly feeling it had a broader, also a more specific reach than other things might do'.*

[Mary, project 1]: *'It's an activity, it's a life skill, it's giving them food, it's getting them family time together and trying different foods that they might not have tried before'.*

Volunteers felt part of something with future as well as current benefits, which also linked to sustainability of change:

[Olivia, project 1]: *'In the longer term it's mental and physical wellbeing in terms of health, because what you're consuming is better for you and it'll make you feel better. So yeah, it's much more long-term sustainable'.*

[Elsie, project 1]: *'And then it's also teaching children life skills'.*

For volunteers in project 2, environmental (reducing food waste), nutritional (using surplus food to benefit others), social and financial benefits were identified:

[Laura, project 2]: *'I hate wastage, I hate the idea that food is being thrown away when people are actually needing it. I don't like inequality in society and I think people are a bit fastidious about the sell-by dates. Environmentally, it's a brilliant idea and it's just so important to support people when you can…'*

[Astrid, project 2]: *'It's blending the needs of the community with the needs of the planet. It's dealing with the food waste and serving the community; I think that's the unique thing about it - not just a café, but using food that would otherwise have gone to waste'.*

[Jasmine, project 2]: '*It's about removing waste from the system, but also about providing somewhere that's nice, warm, non-judgemental for people of any kind, any background to come and feel welcome.*'

Community, as much as environmental benefits of project 2, were highlighted by most volunteers:

[Georgia, project 2]: '*The thing I really see as a value to it is the social side. The ones I see will express their absolute gratitude for it, for its existing so they have somewhere to come that they feel they're acknowledged*'.

[Maeve, project 2]: '*It's like a community for them, they know each other, and they sit with each other and it's somewhere for them to meet*'.

[Gabriella, project 2]: '*People need some sort of social interaction, not just the food or hot food or collecting food, but they need to talk to people, they need people to talk to them....it isn't just dishing out food and feeling good about it* '.

[Chris, project 2]: '*It's very sociable…we will always chat to them and ask them how they are, if they're having a good day and 'Can we help?' and even if it's the only chat they get all day, it's a little bit of social interaction*'.

In project 2, since surplus food was used, clients accessing the café and food hubs were not all necessarily food-insecure. Some supported the scheme for environmental reasons. This meant that people who would not normally meet each other had an opportunity to mix in a safe and welcoming space, which was inclusive and non-judgemental, but also potentially reduced stigma since reasons for attending could be environmental rather than financial. Volunteers valued this:

[Millie, project 2]: '*People from all walks of life are able to access it*'.

[Jasmine, project 2]*: 'You really notice the difference actually when people are – who aren't usually looked at in the eye, if you can say you know, 'Oh hi [name], nice to see you. Two sugars as usual?'. They get such a kick out of being recognised and treated like human beings.*'

[Mariella, project 2]: '*You know, they could say, "This great food waste café," not, "I'm going because it's for people who are poor". There's actually a nice mix of people who are there because they're against food waste. They find it to be tasty food and they come because it's local.*'

[Conor, project 2]: *'Rather than it being seen purely as a soup kitchen to dole out food to people who can't otherwise manage, it's a good mix of people in different walks of life. It's probably a good thing that the mix is happening, rather than people being stigmatised by going to such a place*'.

[Yvette, project 2]: *'I think there's something good about reminding people that it's environmental, it takes away the stigma of why you're coming. A lot of people hide behind that and I think that's really lovely and it's a great excuse for all of us*'.

Volunteers themselves benefited from the mixed clientele, meeting people they would not normally have met. This was seen as a privilege, broadening their horizons and giving them insight:

[Georgia, project 2]: *'In day-to-day life generally we meet people who are like us so to spend time with people who I wouldn't normally other than if I pass them in the street wrapped in a blanket, but probably wouldn't interact. In this circumstance I can properly interact and hear stories about how and why they ended up in situations of need and destitution. I gain a huge amount of self-worth from doing it. I feel good about doing it'.*

[Libby, project 1]: *'I suppose feeling that you aren't just focusing on your own life. It makes you aware of what other people's issues are in their lives'.*

'Community' had multiple meanings for volunteers; in addition to seeing themselves as serving their local community, volunteers formed a friendly group with a shared purpose. They also encouraged clients to develop a sense of community. Friendship among volunteers was described as an important benefit in both projects:

[Ciara, project 1]: *'We've become friends. And everybody is very dedicated, so you don't have anyone who just comes in and bops around having a cup of tea and doing nothing. Everyone puts out the best they can. So it's a joint effort'.*

[Mary, project 1]: *'There's a whole social side to it that is really good that I didn't have. It's a very relaxed happy atmosphere'.*

[Dolores, project 2]: *'I gain a strong sense of community that I belong to a vibrant community of volunteers, and I've made friendships through it. I think that I'm a person who needs to be part of something and it meets that need. It gives me a great sense of belonging'.*

[Elsie, project 1]: *'During heavy lockdown it was light relief, it was the social highlight of the week. Being completely honest and selfish about it, it was getting out, doing something, having the right to do it. And it was fun, everyone was pooling together.'*

In addition to company and a shared sense of purpose and values, doing something, however small, in difficult times felt positive:

[Olivia, project 1]: *'So much bad news…if you do one small good thing you get a benefit yourself. It's not only about providing for someone else, it actually makes you feel a lot better as well. I can't change the world but I can do one small thing. So you yourself don't feel so disempowered, it makes you feel better'.*

Involvement in work both valued by others and personally important was also highlighted:

[Ben, project 2]: '*Making a contribution, being involved in something very well thought out and planned. It's quite a privilege to be part of something like that. It gives you a feeling that in some small way you're helping to make the world a better place*'.

[Rosie, project 1]: '*It gives you a good feeling when you enter the weekend feeling I've done something good and to help others*'.

The open inclusive nature of project 2 was also viewed positively, compared with other forms of food provision where proof of need or a referral may be needed:

[Hannah, project 2]: '*Food banks you have to register, to show you are on Income support and everything else. Here we accept everyone, that is the beauty of it*'.

[Moira, project 2]: '*We don't know what their background is. There are some there's a financial reason, for others it's because of the environment or waste, maybe they're not eligible for a foodbank but things are much harder*'.

[Yvette, project 2]: '*I think it's a better model than the foodbank model, it just feels more right for the communities. I hadn't really thought about it, I don't know who told me this but when you think, "I went and bought that person on the street a sandwich and they didn't want it", it's like we've taken their choice away haven't we? So, it made me really think about things differently. And that actually everybody has a choice and a right, it's sort of a game the wealthy people dictating to them what they can do isn't it?*'

[Millie, project 2]: '*But I think also, because it's not a food bank and it's access for all, I think with food banks you have to be referred and it's very different. I think because we see people all across the board in terms of class and ethnicity, etc, I think that's a value, is that it's open to all.*'

While volunteers generally had altruistic motives and were often driven by intensely important personal values to help others, their own gains are also evident. In that sense their involvement could be viewed as selfish or at least transactional – for giving their time and effort, they gain a sense of self-worth and value, become part of a community, and know they have contributed to important values and causes. The relationship between volunteers and clients is not always positive or straightforward with an implicit power imbalance (Power, 2023; Möller, 2021; Vlaholias-West *et al.,* 2018), which may be neither recognised nor acknowledged. The structures of food support may embody assumed personal responsibility for the situation (Möller, 2021), often ignoring wider drivers of FI (Power, 2023; Caraher and Dowler, 2014). For project 1 volunteers this was less apparent since they do not deal directly with the families but in project 2, where clients are dealt with face-to-face, there is a real risk that what is

intended as helpful and supportive may be experienced as patronising, intrusive or judgemental (Power, 2023), a possibility that some were very conscious of:

> [Dolores, project 2]: '*A visitor came in and asked for four or five sugars in a cup of tea, and our volunteer very innocently said, "Oh that's ridiculous. You shouldn't have more than three." And she's got no right to make that judgement, because somebody who's been living on the streets, sugar in the cup of tea is one of their ways of getting energy. She was thinking about it from an 'oh that can't be doing you any good' health aspect, but that's not her place to make that judgement.'*

For those using food support schemes, such 'innocent judgement' may add to the stigma they often experience (Power, 2023); surveillance and judgement about deservingness of support not only damages relationships between volunteers and those they seek to help but adds to the emotional trauma felt by those on the receiving end (Walker *et al.,* 2022). Judgements are common (Poppendieck, 1998; Garthwaite *et al.,* 2015; Cloke *et al.,* 2017; Power and Small, 2022), perhaps inevitable since unconscious bias affects everyone (Kahneman, 2012). Training to raise awareness of these risks and their possible impact should be a mandatory part of volunteering in such schemes. Although food support volunteers often deal directly with clients and FI derives from social and structural inequalities (Garthwaite *et al.,* 2015), training of volunteers is often *ad hoc* (NCVO, 2021) and may not involve social care (Cameron *et al.,* 2021); potentially they may be dealing with complex cases without being necessarily equipped to do so.

Volunteers' views on FI, poverty and clients

Volunteers at both projects generally expressed empathy for their clients, recognising the difficulties of navigating the complex system of state support:

> [Ken, project 1]: '*A lot of people wouldn't have the skills or education or knowledge to ensure they receive all the benefits they are entitled to….navigating your life online is tough enough when you're computer savvy let alone if you're having to apply for housing benefit, Universal Credit, through a computer*'.

> [Elsie, project 1]: '*I can only imagine what it's like to go to a food bank, but I can't imagine that's nice or easy*'.

> [Mariella, project 2]: '*It would be good if they changed the system so that people weren't waiting a month and a half before having their basic bills met. If they don't have savings, they lose their job, then they need things right away. It seems like the theory of how it works is not the same as the on-the-ground reality.*'

Volunteers viewed FI as an intrinsic part of wider poverty, both complex and engrained, with multiple drivers. Aside from personal issues, these were identified as lack of education, the food system, employment opportunities, housing and childcare costs, and the cost of living:

[Astrid, project 2]: *'We all live life on a knife edge and the lucky ones fall on the right side, the unlucky ones fall the wrong side. Talking to people at the project, they might have lost their home, got divorced and then they lose their home, then they lose their job. It's all connected and before you know it, you're in this downward spiral and that is genuine food poverty and real poverty'.*

[Christopher, project 2]: *'A lot of different drivers of inequality. I personally feel over the past decade, two decades income inequality is increasing but the social safety net is getting lower and lower so there's this section of people who they're often working but even a combination of low wages and whatever support is available isn't sufficient'.*

[Pauline, project 2]: *'There's just totally unequal distribution of wealth. We don't grow enough food ourselves, the supermarkets probably have too much power, there's an uneven distribution of wealth. I think that's got to be the primary reason, because just simply if you have got more money, food is going to be more affordable'.*

[Mary, project 1]: *'I don't think the government at the moment, or politicians, I'm not sure if they understand what it's really like to not have money for food. They don't really understand how that feels because they haven't all been in that position and not enough of them talk about what it's like to not have money, to have no food for your family'.*

These volunteer views reflect the reality. Working poverty is longstanding (DWP, 2023b; McBride and Smith, 2022; Mahase, 2019). The cost of essentials like food remains substantially higher than pre-pandemic (ONS, 2022; Mulrooney *et al.,* 2023). UK society is recognised as unequal, and the gap is widening (The Equality Trust, 2023). Inequalities are not limited to income but extend to wider health determinants (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991; 2021) which enable healthful behaviour choices, thereby affecting disease risk (OHID, 2022). Those struggling to manage, often feeling opprobrium and judgement from others (Garthwaite, 2016), use both physical and mental energy just to manage (Fang *et al*., 2021; Blake, 2019; Thompson *et al*., 2018). Low-income groups are not only more likely to be food insecure (Maguire and Monsivais, 2015), but to have poor diets and worse health (Baker, 2019). Deprivation drives poor nutritional intake, since lack of financial resources impedes the ability to access sufficient, safe and nutritious food (Power *et al.,* 2021; Siddiqui *et al.*, 2020).

Much volunteer commentary echoed these points, directly or indirectly criticising government [in]actions. Support for those on low incomes is outlined in national documents (DEFRA, 2021), as Universal Credit, a means-tested benefit with a 5-week wait before starting during which time there is no support, and Healthy Start, a means-tested benefit for pregnant women and their children aged ≤4 years to buy milk and healthy food and free vitamins (NHS, 2023). Volunteers' criticisms also related to poor housing and inadequate facilities for food storage, preparation and cooking, and educational policy which has not equipped successive generations of children with practical skills including budgeting and cooking.

Although most volunteers were empathetic, this was not universal. Some suggested that those needing help did so due to unwise decision making, linked to poor priorities or education, suggesting that a lack of skills or knowledge contributed to FI:

[Ciara, project 1]: *'Maybe what is lacking in certain families that they haven't got the time or the parents are not responsible enough, or they don't have knowledge of how to cook healthy meals. And in a cheaper way as well'.*

[Astrid, project 2]: *'Sometimes there is poor decision making about what is important to spend your money on. Important to have the posh mobile phones rather than food on a plate. That is an education thing. I don't think they always understand that there are some trade-off decisions, that help with food poverty'.*

[Yvonne, project 2]: *'People sometimes think they're entitled to have whatever. I did without. I'm older, but now they think they should have it all without actually having to put any effort in themselves. To buy the food they want, they don't think they have to cut back. I did without a lot of things bringing my daughter up, I think sometimes people just expect. I never claimed any benefits whatsoever, but I managed.'*

Although potential for abuse was recognised, others saw it as an inevitable part of an imperfect system, one which should be built into provision to ensure that those truly in need receive it:

[Lily, project 1]: *'For every system set up to help people, there are always going to be people who are going to abuse the system and you have to allow for that...living in this wealthy country I think we are duty bound… It's not through want of trying. There's so much pride in people. Don't think people are just casually going and collecting food every week as though it's their divine right.'*

It is unsurprising that some volunteers were ambivalent about clients. Much coverage of the food insecure and vulnerable groups (e.g. the homeless or unemployed), portrays them as work-shy or scroungers, to be pitied or reviled (Strong, 2021; Morrison, 2021). Stigma is common (Purdam *et al.,* 2016; Garthwaite *et al.,*

2015; Caplan, 2016, 2020; Strong, 2020; Walker *et al.,* 2022), and can be internalised by those on the receiving end (Caplan, 2020). Mixed feelings expressed by some volunteers also exemplify the unequal relationship between those giving and receiving food support. Traditional models of food support have been criticised for implicitly embedding stigma through their practices, such as use of referral systems requiring proof of need, and lack of agency for clients e.g. through lack of food choices or no possibility of making a financial contribution (Möller, 2021; May *et al.,* 2019). Models utilising donation schemes such as pay-as-you-feel tread a line between enabling recipients to pay, thereby dignifying and valuing them (Walker *et al*., 2022; Nourish Scotland and the Poverty Truth Commission, 2018), without excluding those who cannot pay. In practice, conversations with the manager of project 2 utilising this model suggested that amounts received are falling as the cost-of-living rises, but that many clients use coping mechanisms such as paying in advance when they have funds, strategies largely invisible to the volunteers (personal communications; Mulrooney *et al.,* 2023). Training of volunteers in relation to bias, assumptions and dignity is thus essential to ensure that interactions are positive and dignified, but training is inconsistent and devolved to individual organisations (NCVO, 2021; Nourish Scotland and the Poverty Truth Commission, 2018).

Key ethical dilemmas in directly engaging with FI

Volunteers raised several ethical issues. One was the perceived subcontracting of responsibility for food provision to the charitable and voluntary sector, so the government could avoid responsibility:

[Ken, project 1]: *'Deliberate decision that they can rely on food banks and voluntary stuff to cover people who are in poverty without them having to pay for it through taxing the electorate…it then appears as if they're a big cost-saving government and party…I think as a country a lot of food support and poverty support has been handed out to the charitable organisations which shouldn't be the case'.*

[Ciara, project 1]: *'I don't think the communities should rely on us. There's got to be another solution. At the end of the day, not many people can volunteer'.*

[Libby, project 1]: *'My husband, when he first came to this country [from France] 30-odd years ago used to say 'But if everybody volunteers the government will never do it''.*

This was reflected in exasperation at perceived lack of direct government action to address FI:

[Mary, project 1]: *'I don't understand why they [government] are not saying 'Ok we have to do something about this'. Reduce tax on fruit and vegetables and raise taxes on junk food, make that more expensive and healthier food less expensive'.*

[Sinead, project 1*]: 'I think the government are not doing anything to help'.*

[Moira, project 2]*: 'I honestly don't understand why fruit and veg is so expensive compared to a bag of doughnuts or a loaf of bread and that unfortunately in food poverty areas, is what people fill up on because that's the cheapest and no or very little nutrition.'*

This concern has also been raised by others (Williams *et al.*, 2016, Caplan, 2016, Garthwaite, 2017; Lambie-Mumford, 2019; MacLeod *et al.*, 2019). The devolution of food support to the charitable and voluntary sector has allowed the state to retreat; volunteers being left to pick up the pieces of an austerity programme (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2019), followed by the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. Volunteer support is not infinite or free, requiring significant investment (Kings Fund, 2018). While valuing and benefitting from their experience, volunteers are increasingly relied on to provide basic food support, some of which itself has been critiqued as being less than ideal from dignity and autonomy (Stettin *et al.*, 2022; Walker *et al.*, 2022; Nourish Scotland and the Poverty Truth Commission, 2018; Holweg and Lienbacher, 2011) as well as nutritional perspectives (Oldroyd *et al.* 2022; Fallaize *et al.*, 2020; Irwin *et al.*, 2007; Simmet *et al.*, 2017; Beck, 2016). Clearly for many volunteers, this disconnect between their altruism and the knowledge that their involvement absolved the government of the need to act caused them unease. How this may be overcome is unclear - it is not evident that without volunteers, the government would step in.

Interesting tensions were identified between taking food waste from supermarkets and the true environmental benefits of this, and the difficulties of managing an uncertain food flow in project 2:

[Pauline, project 2]: '*Sometimes there's a long drive to somewhere where there's nothing to collect, or very little, and on those occasions the net eco benefit is questionable'.*

[Ben, project 2]: '*There's still the environmental footprint of the lorries having driven the stuff to the supermarket and then we're spending time in cars to pick it up. I guess there is some saving because food is a precious resource and it takes a lot of environmental resources to produce it so I guess as we're saving some then that's a little bit. I don't know how much real environmental impact there is'.*

An important issue for some volunteers in project 2 was whether their use of surplus food enabled companies effectively to greenwash rather than address the issues which led to food surplus in the first place. There was a suspicion that the project might impede systemic national structural change which lacks legislative and regulatory clarity, and that removal of the surplus food removed supermarkets' motivation to act:

[Christopher, project 2]: '*You are waiting for them to offload what they don't want but it should really be their responsibility to redistribute that, not a bunch of volunteers who are giving up their time for free….thinking about systems change, the supermarket should be dealing with their own waste and developing systems themselves that redistribute food to appropriate end users and it does feel a little, that's what I worry about sometimes, am I basically doing their dirty work for them for free?'*

Others felt that things were improving, and that reduction in food surplus while problematic for the project, was the ultimate aim:

[Carlotta, project 2]: '*I think there is a tide turn at the moment, isn't there. even the supermarkets are learning that they're wasting food and cutting back, and generally there's a feeling about reusing and redoing and people are being encouraged to not buy more than you need or to make do with the food in your fridge and make up a meal. I feel that there's a sea change coming, I hope. I think it's good if they cut back because that actually is the point of the project, to stop it going to landfill.'*

Finally, there was a disparity between some of the food being supplied by supermarkets and volunteers wish to provide healthy food to recipients:

[Jack, project 2]: '*Perhaps the supermarkets have got more work to do there but then why would they want to, it's not in their profit is it?'.*

[Christopher, project 2]: '*Let's say they donated 100 doughnuts, is it really good food to be giving out?'. I guess I don't want to have to rely on food that supermarkets give away for free, that doesn't feel like it's the cornerstone of the good. The cornerstone is that you're bringing people together to feed them good food in an affordable way and if the input needs to be subsidised or if the government needs to enable there to be affordable healthy, food at a system level then I think that's a better solution than going and asking the supermarket what they didn't sell that day and then sadly sometimes giving people mostly quite unhealthy food'.*

Volunteers' comments on the use of food waste are part of a wider debate on the ethics of using surplus food to address food insecurity (Caplan, 2017; Saxena, 2020). It has been described as a 'band-aid', addressing neither the causes of food overproduction nor FI (Papargyropoulou *et al*., 2022; Caraher and Furey, 2017). Surplus food redistribution in the UK has increased 3-fold since 2015; in 2021, it was over 106,000 tonnes, worth over £330 million (WRAP, 2022a). Redistribution of surplus food is lauded as part of the Coronation Food Project (2023) and the Courtauld

2030 Commitment, a voluntary agreement which aims via collaborative action to address UN Sustainable Development Goal 12 (responsible production and consumption), via action to reduce food waste, water stress and greenhouse gas emissions (WRAP, 2022b). However, the use of 'left-over food for left-over people' (Riches, 2018) can be questioned not just on ethical but nutritional grounds, as the volunteers observed. It focuses more on managing waste produced than on the wasteful, arguably dysfunctional food system which causes it (Messner *et al*., 2020). Some volunteers recognised and struggled with this:

[Yvette, project 2]: '*I don't think there's a clear link through of support and obviously we're supporting in one way aren't we with benefits and whatever but clearly, it doesn't work, there's something not working and the foodbanks are wrong aren't they? We shouldn't need it, we shouldn't need the foodbanks and we shouldn't need this project, we should only need this project because it is environmental and ideally, you want to not have enough food coming in because then we're solving the environmental side of it'.*

Beyond that, what is being donated is also important, particularly given that for many, accessing food support is ongoing (Papargyropoulou *et al*., 2022; Garratt, 2017). From this perspective too, the nutritional value of the food donated has been critiqued (Kenny and Sage, 2019; Garratt, 2017; Simmet *et al*., 2017; Castetbon *et al*., 2016; Lindberg *et al*., 2015; van der Horst *et al*., 2014). Health is often viewed as separate from the issue of food provision (Kenny and Sage, 2021), despite a call from the FAO to include health in food provision (FAO, 2023). Since diet is a major contributor to chronic disease development, forcing those using food support to access food inappropriate to their nutritional needs is likely to contribute to the already marked health inequalities in the UK (OHID, 2022). It is also somewhat ironic that many of the highly processed foods often available as surplus, whose redistribution is considered environmentally beneficial, are themselves produced and transported at enormous environmental cost (Vega Mejía *et al.*, 2018).

Contradictions around the pay-as-you-feel model.

Lack of autonomy of those using food support is a criticism of traditional models of food support (Walker *et al.,* 2022). The very benefit of a mixed clientele enabling people from different walks of life to mix and reducing stigma experienced

by clients, also caused some volunteers to question the voluntary nature of the payment scheme used in project 2. Positioning the project as addressing environmental waste meant that some clients potentially took food without payment, even if they could afford to pay, since there was no onus to do so (and they may have felt they were helping the environment in so doing). This clearly caused some volunteers anxiety, even as they recognised why it happened:

[Jasmine, project 2]: '*I think there probably are people who come and just think that they're doing – almost doing a favour by taking the food waste away, and in one sense they are. Because if you look at it from the outside perspective you just see that we've got free food to give away. And you don't necessarily appreciate that there are the cost of salaries, there's the transport cost, there's the cost of all those other things.*'

[Mariella, project 2]: '*The policy is that we don't ask for money and that we don't pointedly remind people to put something in the pot, and that's good because there can be a lot of shame around poverty. And, you know, people might, they probably wouldn't refuse to pay, but they might just not ever come again. So I think, I mean, you do slightly feel like, well, for the ones who could pay, you know, they might put their hands in their pocket more often, but you can't have it both ways really. You know, you can't, you can't, sort of, judge who looks like they might be able to pay and remind them and then not remind somebody else.*'

[Astrid, project 2]: '*I got a little bit miffed if people came and took a lot of food and didn't give anything, when perhaps they could have done. You sometimes get people rocking up in their Range Rover and not paying anything, it was that sort of thing that I used to find a little bit frustrating. But I think how they thought of it was that they were doing their bit because they were saving food from being wasted. So that is equally valuable, it wasn't my place to judge that because somebody might have a Range Rover, our training was that we wouldn't judge people.*'

Some volunteers felt that pay-as-you-feel was valuable in alleviating shame and generally those who could, contributed. They viewed it as pragmatic, enabling access for all:

[Laura, project 2]: '*I always thank people if I see them putting in money but I'm not very clear in my head how many people pay and I don't – I know that some people just put a few bob in and that's fine. I assume that's what they can afford and I wouldn't like to see people feeling that they couldn't take anything because they didn't have the money.*'

[Pauline, project 2]: '*To me it seems like a very sensible way of doing things because I think there's a real breadth of socioeconomic groups and you're going to have quite a lot of I guess well off, middle class people who are going to happily come along and pay some money to contribute to the costs whilst buying products that otherwise would have been wasted, so they're doing it for green motivations. But*

at the same time you've got people that are just in need, particularly with the cost of living crisis, so I think it's that flexibility that it provides so that those who can afford to pay do and those that can't don't have to.'

[Astrid, project 2]: *'I think it's a hard one because I think more money probably could be raised if there was more encouragement for people who could afford to pay but I think that's a fine line because as soon as you start doing that, you're then making people who don't pay feel vulnerable.'*

Others assumed that some clients took advantage by not contributing even if they could. These assumptions reflected a tendency to identify some as less deserving than others:

[Gabriella, project 2]: *'It was often the people that you thought had less money paid and there were a few people there I thought probably didn't need to use it. I don't think there was a lot of abuse of it but there were a few people that I think misused it. Not that many but a few. I can't remember who was talking about it, somebody's skiing holiday, and I thought, "Well if you're going to book a skiing holiday, you don't necessarily need this."'*

[Carlotta, project 2]: *'If I'm going to be slightly judgemental here, you do find yourself thinking, "Well, he's opened his wallet and I can see notes in there, £10 and £20 notes, and he scrabbles around for some change and tries to hide his hand when he puts it in the box." In my head I probably am being a bit judgemental but I've learnt that you always get that from people.'*

[Georgia, project 2]: *'I kind of feel sometimes that there are definitely people who could do a little bit more on that on the money side of things who almost take pleasure in getting away with it. I just find that really disappointing.'*

[Moira, project 2]: *'There's one guy that comes in, his wife is still working and he takes loads but probably puts in two 10p coins, for example. So yes, I guess you'll always have people with differing views or people don't put any in at all, well again, there's your pay as you feel, they don't have to.'*

The opportunity to contribute, no matter how tokenistic, helps enable dignity and alleviate shame (Walker *et al.*, 2022), a highly damaging emotion (Chase and Walker, 2012). Despite this, several volunteers were unable to avoid making judgements and assumptions about client's abilities to pay. Framing this surplus food project as environmentally beneficial widens accessibility, reducing stigma and shame, but also means that clients who can afford to pay may choose not to, since they feel they are doing the project – and the environment – a favour. Perhaps this is another reason why the use of surplus food to address FI is not ideal. Making assumptions about individual level of need or ability to pay may be common, but it is

also often incorrect and may be harmful, highlighting the need for ongoing training of volunteers:

> [Dolores, project 2]: '*And every now and again we do have to remind people, because people are innocently, they're not maliciously making judgements that could impact people, but actually they do.*
>
> *So you might get somebody who says, "This food's really good, people are getting really good value, and I keep seeing the same people not putting money in." It has been an issue and we do remind people, and then someone says, "Yeah but I know that woman who doesn't put any money in the pot, she lives in a big house." Now I know this particular woman. She does live in a nice big house. But I know that she cooks and takes food to a group of old people. So actually what she's doing is she's coming to [project] on the environmental aspect, to use food that would otherwise go to waste, and she cooks it, she makes chutneys and she makes jams, and she gives them to the old ladies who live in the alms houses. So that's a real classic example of you cannot make a judgement about people and say, "I know she lives in a nice house and I've seen her at the organic farmers' market."*

Final Thoughts

Volunteerism is advocated for and encouraged by a wide range of organisations and bodies, including the UK government (Smith, 2000; Cabinet Office, 2010; Marmot, 2010; PHE, 2021; UN, 2021; OHID, 2022). It is associated with improved mental and physical health, including in older adults, as well as community resilience and cohesion (Jenkinson *et al*., 2013; Anderson *et al*., 2014; Guiney and Machado, 2018; Abrams *et al.,* 2021).

While volunteerism is widely promoted, what is unclear is where the line is between voluntary community action and where government responsibility ought to be. The UK government appears to have largely 'subcontracted' the responsibility for food insecurity to volunteers and absolved itself of its responsibilities. While the volunteers in this study accepted many of the above points and were concerned that their work would inadvertently enable an undesirable *status quo* to continue, they were highly motivated to help, particularly for causes they considered worthwhile, where the benefits were targeted and transparent, and within their local communities.

Given that the *status quo* is likely to continue for some time, it is essential to think of ways to better support volunteers and address the dilemmas and contradictions they face. This makes the training of volunteers to ensure they understand societal and

structural drivers of FI and the rationale behind the pay-as-you-feel model essential to ensure that they do not inadvertently add to the stigma and shame often associated with FI. The contradictions highlighted by several volunteers in relation to aspects such as judgements around deservingness, use of surplus food to address food insecurity and whether volunteers themselves enable continued government inaction to address structural inequalities are also important discussion points.

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The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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