Different visions of community: Oxfordshire residents’ food-related lived experiences of COVID-19

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Executive Summary

This report is based on 13 qualitative interviews that were done on various online video-calling platforms where individuals shared their food-related lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic with me. Individuals also shared any changes in their eating habits from before the pandemic and the reasons for these changes. Four major motifs recurred throughout the discussions. Firstly, the community spirit established at cafés like Waste2Taste, at the markets, and within organisations such as the Cherwell Larder has been extremely important in facilitating a positive experience with food, and different visions of community, since the pandemic started; simultaneously, the absence of such ‘food communities’ for some of the research participants resulted in feelings of isolation. Secondly, I found that people’s relationship with food or the ability to access food was impacted by health, if someone was shielding for example. The third important theme in this report revolves around how crucial it was for some of those who shared their stories with me to uphold the local food economy during the pandemic and the ties between communities supporting local farmers/producers and families going home to grow their own produce which encourages independence. Finally, one of my research participant’s lived experience with food was seriously affected by her nationality and identity which affect her ability to find employment, illustrating the intricate relationship between identity, nationality, employment and food access.

On the basis of conversations with the research participants, this report has two main recommendations. Firstly, community food services which have been central in the creation of ‘food communities’ need to become even stronger by being better linked to the needs of their local communities. Secondly, with the assistance of Good Food Oxford (GFO),
Community Food Networks need to be widened to include local producers, local community growing projects and the local economy to ensure robust local supply chains.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the 13 individuals who took the time to sit down and share their stories with me on video calling platforms which can at times be impersonal especially when discussing sensitive topics such as food.

Fiona Steel, Hannah Fenton, Nina Osswald, Frances Hansford and the rest of the GFO team were very helpful in putting together this report.

Many thanks to Oxford Mutual Aid (OMA) for the Chromebooks and for their time. Finally, I am thankful for all the amazing community food service leaders tackling food access in Oxfordshire but especially to the ones who assisted me in various ways throughout this research.
Food access and COVID-19

This section will begin by discussing the backdrop of COVID-19 and how it relates to food access. I will then briefly discuss the debates on food insecurity and food poverty and conclude with a discussion on how food poverty/insecurity has been conceptualised.

COVID-19 context

Prior to COVID-19; for some, hunger was a “mode of existence in UK society” (Livingstone 2015, p. 188). Oxfordshire is one of the wealthiest counties in the UK according to the Department for Communities and Local Government (2015), yet it saw “a 3-fold increase in the number of users of Community Food Services… [with estimates of] between 5140 and 5560 users” (Good Food Oxford 2020b, p. 4) since the beginning of COVID-19. The economic impact of COVID-19 is evident in how “financially, lower earners have been hardest hit by the outbreak” (Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment 2020, p. 35) as jobs have been lost. The interviews for this report highlighted the relationship between the loss of jobs, reduced hours, not being able to go to work, and low food security. This relationship has always existed because of deep structural issues that can only be addressed by the government such as “low incomes relative to food prices, under- and unemployment, and the inadequacy of benefit payments coupled with the increasing use of benefit sanctions” (Hansford and Friedman 2015, p. 27) which all result in individuals slipping into food insecurity. The solutions are “Decent work and wages, and adequate welfare provision, [all of which] are the responsibility of government and business” (Hansford and Friedman 2015, p. 27).

A result of COVID-19’s effect on the ability to work is that in the United Kingdom (UK), “during the first few weeks of the lockdown as many as 7.7 million adults reduced their meal
portion sizes or missed meals, and up to 3.7 million adults sought charity food or used a food bank” (Oxfam Media Briefing 2020, p. 2). Furthermore, The Food Foundation found that “there are nearly 18 million people who are at an elevated risk of the virus either due to age, underlying health risks, or that they are pregnant. This group were asked to follow strict social distancing measures in order to protect their health and are therefore likely to experience some limitations in how they can access their food” (in Bradshaw Food Active Presentation 2020). About 900,000 people in this group “are both at elevated risk of the virus and have low or very low food security” (in Bradshaw Food Active Presentation 2020). In order to assist this group, the government sent out food parcels, however, “Government food parcels consisting of tinned and processed food do not suit everyone’s nutritional needs or preferences” (Sustain 2020b, p. 1). In Emma’s case, who is one of the research participants, government food parcels made her blood glucose levels fluctuate due to the high carbohydrate content of these parcels; which was a risk as Emma is diabetic.

The debate on food insecurity/poverty

Food poverty has been defined as “the inability to acquire or eat an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty of being able to do so” (Garthwaite et al. 2015, p. 38). There are some scholars such as Purdam et al. who differentiate between food poverty and food insecurity as they state that “Food poverty and the need to visit a food bank can be a temporary problem; however, the issue of food insecurity is more complex than this and encompasses the wider problem of long-term financial vulnerability” (2016, p. 1084). The Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment on the other hand stated that “The term ‘food poverty’ is often used interchangeably with the term ‘food insecurity’” (2020, p. 35) and they view food insecurity to be a result of poverty. Sustain and Church Action on Poverty similarly use food poverty
and food insecurity interchangeably (Food Power website). For the purposes of this report, both the terms food poverty and food insecurity will be viewed as referring to the same uncertain food-related experience during COVID-19.

As this report will demonstrate, an array of people from all walks of life struggle with food access; particularly individuals with certain health conditions, and those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), which “is an immigration condition that restricts access to benefits listed as public funds, to homelessness assistance under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996, and local authority allocation of social housing under PART VI of the Housing Act 1996. In addition to affecting people with a wide range of visas it also impacts people who are undocumented” (Sustain 2020a, p. 3). A critique of NRPF and a solution to such a policy is the right to food, which if enforced would require states such as the UK “to ensure: (a) The availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture. (b) The accessibility of such food in ways that are sustainable and that do not interfere with the enjoyment of other human rights. Accessibility includes both physical and economic accessibility” (Sustain 2020a, p. 6). The United Kingdom has ratified treaties that encourage this right such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), however this is yet to be enforced.

How do we think about food insecurity/poverty?

The media has portrayed food insecurity/poverty in a way that disparages those struggling with accessing sufficient and/or adequate food and does not usually present these individuals’ lived experiences with dignity (Purdam et al. 2016). For example, “The lifestyle choices of foodbank users have been called into question by the government and the mass media,
reinforcing the neoliberal narrative of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor which is often associated with benefits recipients” (Garthwaite et al. 2015, p. 39). In 2017, an audience member on BBC Question Time said, “I haven’t visited a foodbank before, but I have known people that have. And the vast majority of them that do go for free food, smoke, drink and have Sky television [groans from the rest of the audience]. That is the truth” (Chapman 2017). This stereotype of foodbank users as ‘free riders’ who do not actually need assistance ignores how much courage it takes to walk into a foodbank and how “People facing food poverty are not only food deprived but are also likely to be financially, time and resource poor” (Garthwaite et al. 2015, p. 43) and so have an array of reasons that go beyond the superficial lifestyle critique for why they are struggling to access food. These stereotypes are patronising as they can also have underlying assumptions that those experiencing food insecurity/poverty do not know how to manage money well; and yet as Jack Monroe points out, these perspectives are far removed from the reality as she reminds us that she knows “the price of potatoes at three different supermarkets through eight consecutive years…I can tell you the most economical way of buying literally anything. I had an Excel spreadsheet for that…” (Monroe 2020). Realising and being aware not to repeat these popular tropes informed my methodological approach which I will discuss next.
**Methodological approach**

My research approach combined the Storytelling Methodology designed by Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) (2020) with ethnographic semi-structured interviews. My justification for this combined approach is that the Storytelling Methodology aims to create an equal environment between the storyteller and story collector where lived experiences can be shared (AOFS 2020). Ethnographic semi-structured interviews were useful as these interviews prioritise participants’ experiences but also do not ignore the experiences of the researcher, the researcher’s observations and their role in the research process as researchers cannot be objective. This ethnographic approach has been used by other scholars such as Garthwaite et al. (2015) in their research on food poverty/insecurity. My research question asked:

*What have been people’s lived experiences surrounding food during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

I did not use the questions set by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) in the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) survey module – which I have attached in the Appendix – as I found these questions to be invasive (FAO). Instead, I structured my interview questions such that they were open and broad as this is in line with the best practice of the Storytelling Methodology where “the storytellers decide on what is the most significant impact for them” (AOFS 2020, p. 6). It was also important for me to use this collaborative approach as I am conscious of my own positionality and how I do not have experience of food insecurity/poverty. Food Power warns that “As people become more confident storytellers of their experiences, it’s important not to exploit this opportunity” (2020, p. 6), and constantly being aware of my role in the research process helped to mitigate exploiting people’s stories.
In total this report has been informed by the stories of 13 individuals as seen in Table 1; five individuals who have experienced food insecurity/poverty; two representatives from the East Oxford Farmers’ and Community Market and one representative from the South Oxford Farmers and Community Market (SOFACOMA) – both markets have continued to operate during the pandemic; and one representative from each of five different community food services (Botley Community Fridge, Oxford Mutual Aid (OMA), Waste2Taste, Good Food Oxford (GFO) and Cherwell Larder). I am aware that there are some community food service representatives who have experienced food insecurity/poverty in their past which illustrates that there is no binary between those who have experienced food insecurity/poverty and those who are community service providers.

Contact was established with the individuals who have lived experiences of food insecurity through snowball sampling and recommendations from the community food service representatives. Community service leaders, East Oxford Farmers’ and Community Market and SOFACOMA were contacted directly as they have an existing relationship with GFO. Participants were from a range of ethnic backgrounds but I have not specifically disclosed these identities as I did not receive consent from all the research participants to do so, the table presenting such information would simplify how some of the research participants choose to identify, and I do not think the table is crucial for the story I am telling in this report.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of research participant</th>
<th>Their role i.e. individual with lived experience (LE), Community Food Service (CFS) leader or representative of markets (M)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>CFS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>CFS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>CFS</td>
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<td>Maria</td>
<td>CFS</td>
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<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>CFS</td>
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<td>Scarlett</td>
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<td>Aamaal</td>
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<td>Ava</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Klara</td>
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<td>Oliver</td>
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<td>Mia</td>
<td>LE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>LE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>LE</td>
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</tbody>
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*Table 1. The anonymised names of research participants and their role in the research.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female research participants</th>
<th>Male research participants</th>
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<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
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*Table 2. The gender breakdown of research participants.*

Research participants were sent a brief research design in order for their consent to be informed. I received consent to record the interviews from all the research participants. Some
individuals preferred for their identities to be anonymised and for me to use pseudonyms whilst others were fine with being easily identifiable. Due to the sensitivity of the information in this report I decided to anonymise all the identities. After each interview, I transcribed the storytelling session and synthesised it to the most important quotes and information which I stored on the GFO SharePoint and which is therefore accessible to the GFO team only.

A limitation of this research is that it is not generalisable as it is based on the lived experiences of 13 individuals. Nonetheless, the food-related lived experiences of COVID-19 presented below in the four main themes of this report provide a depth that may not be found in quantitative studies of food insecurity/poverty during the pandemic. Another limitation may be the digital exclusion of those whose lived experiences may be inaccessible as they do not have laptops or internet access, or are unable to access online video calling platforms. In order to mitigate against this and in collaboration with OMA, GFO offered Chromebooks to individuals who wanted to participate but did not have the necessary devices. This Chromebook offer was taken up by two of the 13 Oxfordshire residents who I spoke with.
COVID-19 and community

In the interviews, a recurring concept revolved around ‘food communities’ that are based on food or lack thereof, and this significantly shaping individuals’ experiences of COVID-19. This applied whether the individual I was speaking to was an Oxfordshire resident, a representative of one of the markets, or a leader of a community food service. For example, Mia and Michael both made it clear that the physical and emotional support they received from the team at the Waste2Taste Café not only helped them become more confident but also, as seen in an excerpt from a poem written by Mia, fostered;

“A community that communes around and about great food and good intentions,
Testing out our food inventions.
...
Preparing food for hungry kids that they may grow strong and true and have life chances they can embrace without fear, without shame or loss and hungry stomachs”. – Mia (I am grateful to Mia and Maria for allowing me to use an excerpt of this poem).

Waste2Taste is a social enterprise comprising a café where food is served. Waste2Taste also facilitate programmes with organisations like Matilda House to assist those who are homeless. Mia has found lockdown to be challenging especially staying up-to-date with the news which she finds contradictory and sometimes confusing. To avoid focusing on the negativity and panic that has sometimes been the norm during lockdown, she enjoyed going to Waste2Taste to “make coffee and that…and sometimes I get like food bits and uh I just feel uh safe and cared for which I think everyone should feel” (Mia 2020). Even though the community that is offered by Waste2Taste has been central to Mia and Michael’s food-
related experiences during COVID-19, this does not mean that they were ignorant or inexperienced chefs prior to COVID-19 or were only empowered by Waste2Taste. For example, Mia used to host three-course dinner parties for Americans who were visiting the UK, and Michael has always liked to experiment in the kitchen. Remembering this ensures that professionals, service providers, volunteers and the general public alike have a holistic view of individuals who may have low food security as Mia emphasised that “you learn not to judge anyone ‘cause you don’t know their story” (Mia 2020). Mia’s history hosting dinner parties also illustrates that experiencing food insecurity/poverty is not the entirety of someone’s identity.

Community food services have been crucial during COVID-19 for the ongoing material support they have offered where, for example, the team at Waste2Taste provided over 2000 meals since the pandemic started; and OMA’s Kitchen Collective programme cooked and shared over 7570 meals from 1st May 2020 until 10th August 2020. In addition to this material support, community food services were also important for the emotional support they offered whereby Maria and Evelyn would check in on their service users by regularly phoning them for example.

Amongst community food services themselves, there was also a sense of community and cooperation facilitated by GFO. Linda explained how GFO “set up these community food networks within each district so at a more localised level enabling the local players to come together and share their resources, challenges [and] experiences together as a group of food providers but also with the local councils and local voluntary organisations in that area” (Linda 2020). As a result, Oxfordshire has “more connectivity between services through networks” (Linda 2020).
For the markets, community was just as important as it was for Michael and Mia. A hurdle both markets faced was that SOFACOMA were told they could not operate from their usual venue – the South Oxford Community Centre; and East Oxford Farmers’ and Community Market were asked to stop using the inside space of their regular venue at East Oxford Primary School. I have reviewed some emails which indicate the constraints that the Community Centre and the school themselves were working with as a result of risk assessments that were in line with government regulations which stated that people should not be indoors with other people from different households.

Klara from East Oxford Farmers’ and Community Market illustrated what community meant for her during lockdown when she pointed out how, “stallholders you know you get to know them uhm so but that was really heightened during COVID ’cause again people weren’t seeing anyone and suddenly the people I saw the most are people in the market just cause I see them every week now (laughs)” (Klara 2020). For Ava who is committed to ensuring that local farmers are supported, SOFACOMA not being able to use their regular venue was challenging as it was “so uncommunal. They have absolutely no idea what the knock-on-effect [was]” (Ava 2020). Ava recounted how one Saturday, “my lovely veg growers spent all Saturday packing 40 boxes with their produce so that – and and then we set up a-a time slot queuing system so, I then went through the list of people that were on the ord-you know that had ordered and some you know they came in 15 minute time slots so that we could manage the queueing. In fact, I well up (starts crying) when I think about it, I worked so hard, it was so stressful…” (Ava 2020). This illustrates how solidarity with the vegetable growers enabled Ava to overcome the challenge of finding a new venue. Ava’s
commitment to her community and ensuring local produce is delivered to households also supports the local economy which I will discuss in more depth below.

Mia, Michael, Klara and Ava’s aforementioned accounts show the different visions of community that the individuals who shared their food-related lived experiences with me faced during COVID-19. A representative from OMA explained what ‘food communities’ have meant for her lived experience of COVID-19 when she pointed out that as a society we are all responsible to one another, and so OMA is “just redistributing resources where they should go and we’re using the skills that we have to support – mutually support one another” (Shannon 2020). According to this definition of community, we all have ownership of resources. Similarly to Ava’s Saturday spent with vegetable growers making sure residents received their weekly vegetable order, food was also seen as encouraging solidarity in times of crisis for the representative from OMA who pointed out that Coronavirus has “shown us that actually if – when people come together and are willing to kinda like do a little bit of hustling together and really just support one another, like we can really do a lot more for each other. We definitely can. People need to be-believe that it’s like something that’s normal, rather than extraordinary” (Shannon 2020).

As individuals were developing the relationships and community ties, as discussed above, that were centred around food during COVID-19, the effect was to break down barriers and stigmas in a way that was humanising and afforded dignity. For example, Vanessa runs a service where she delivers food parcels to individuals who are homeless in the city centre. She pointed out how “a lot of people see this great divide between homeless people and them and this whole thing about oh you know ‘you poor homeless person’ and actually they’re not, they’re funny and have interesting stories and whatever. I think just generally seeing people
who are not in need meeting people who are in need – both the drivers who deliver our regular food parcels and cyclists who deliver to homeless people – has been so rewarding” (Vanessa 2020).

As much as community was a central feature of my research on participants’ food-related lived experiences of COVID-19, the lack of a ‘food community’, such as being unable to eat with loved ones, or even the lack of adequate food support from the wider community such as the government, gravely impacted some of my research participants. For example, Scarlett is medically vulnerable as she had a stroke last year, is in heart failure and is also diabetic. What this meant during lockdown is that “Because the rules outside for 2-metre distance actually applied in the house, not many people know that it applies for people that are very vulnerable inside their home too…you can’t hug your family, you can’t sit and have a meal with them” (Scarlett 2020). The effect of this was a lonely lockdown experience.

Inadequate community support from the government also adversely affected Emma’s food-related experiences of COVID-19, which were compounded by how Emma has no family or friends who live in Oxford, yet she is also medically vulnerable. My discussions with individuals as well as community food service representatives highlighted the consensus that the government could have done more in terms of food provision for those in need during COVID-19. For example, Evelyn pointed out that “30% of our larder users are actually medically vulnerable and a lot of them were getting government boxes and couldn’t actually eat the food they were given because the government boxes all had the same things in them. They had a bag of potatoes, a bag of either apples or oranges uhm…a bunch of tinned food, some kind of cereal, long life milk and a roll of toilet paper. I mean that was what was in these government boxes that were supposed to help the medically vulnerable” (Evelyn 2020).
The lack of adequate and sufficient support from the government is situated in a wider context where the government is removed from some citizens’ experiences of accessing food. This is evident in the government’s recommendation for a healthy diet in the form of the Eatwell plate which costs £5.99 a day; which is too expensive for those who are the least affluent members of society in the UK (Dimbleby 2020). Research found that whether an individual is on the National Living Wage, the Real Living Wage or the Oxford Living Wage, “all three budgets fall short of affording the Eatwell Guide once Oxford housing costs are considered” (Green 2019, p. 9). This is illustrative of how the “obligations of the state to ensure access to affordable food have not been fulfilled in the UK” (Purdam et al. 2016, p. 1083) and so because these obligations had not been fulfilled prior to COVID-19, there have been limitations in the government’s response to COVID-19 as seen in Evelyn and Emma’s experiences with food parcels.

Perhaps in light of the minimal government role, there was a strong sense amongst community food service leaders of the increased need for their organisations to continue running in anticipation of a ‘second wave’ of Coronavirus this autumn and even well after the pandemic. As Evelyn pointed out, “the sort of economic consequences of COVID-19 are not going to go away anytime soon…about 40% of the people who come to us for help, their financial hardships are new because of COVID. So, this is something where like they never really grew up with any kind of shortages or any kind of poverty, so they don’t know what to do. They don’t know how to cook chickpeas and so there’s a lot of kind of problems of they’ve never eaten this type of food. They are – they’ve never seen some of the vegetables that come around at certain seasons” (Evelyn 2020). Whilst Evelyn’s statistics are for Cherwell Larder, the statistics for Oxfordshire show that since the beginning of COVID-19, “89% of respondents cite[d] financial difficulties as the most common reason for accessing
services” (Good Food Oxford 2020a) and “60% of services reported that more than 50% of their users are ‘new’ users since COVID-19” (Good Food Oxford 2020a).

Waste2Taste are also aware that they are needed in their community, but as they are a social enterprise, they are in need too. Maria articulated this by pointing out how “we (Waste2Taste) can’t really continue to uh to do what we do if we don’t have any support, any kind of money to come and pay for the overheads, to pay you know simple things, members of staff and it’s – it’s very hard. It’s really hard if we don’t have an income coming. We lost 100% of our income, we need – we do need help because we feel it’s gonna go even bigger probably greater need as soon as the furlough scheme finishes it’s gonna go mental. We’re gonna need a lot of support” (Maria 2020). This anticipation by community food services demonstrates preparation and awareness of how “The COVID-19 outbreak has pushed more people into economic difficulty…an impact that is being felt more acutely by those in deprived areas” (Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment 2020, p. 8).

The community food service leaders have done an outstanding job – including the many who are not mentioned in this report – but my discussion with Vanessa made me question at what cost? Vanessa pointed out the emotional toll on herself of her food-related lived experience of COVID-19 as manager of Botley Community Fridge. The role was so demanding for her that she pointed out that “If there was a second spike, I think let somebody else run it (Botley Community Fridge) this time” (Vanessa 2020). An informative video of Vanessa and her team at work can be viewed here.
**Health and food**

People’s lived experiences surrounding food during COVID-19 have been connected to their health. This is consistent with the findings by the Food Foundation that I highlighted at the beginning of this report (in Bradshaw Food Active Presentation 2020). Scarlett’s inability to access food was compounded by her lack of work, which is a result of her health issues, as she pointed out that she “can’t work, nobody will employ uh someone in heart failure to work that if they catch a virus they have to be off for weeks and weeks trying to get over it” (Scarlett 2020). Nonetheless for Scarlett, the community support from Cherwell Larder in the form of vegetable grow boxes helped her daughter’s autism and sense of independence as “Where before we had trouble trying to get her to eat vegetables because she didn’t like ‘em. With the autism too, it’s really hard to explain like ‘you need to eat fresh veg’. So, literally getting her to go out there (to their grow boxes outside of their house as seen in Figure 1. and 2.) and say to her ‘right is there any carrots that are ready? Is there any tomatoes that are ready to be picked?’ She can see herself. She uhm likes going out there and it’s like also given her a bit of independence ‘cause she has to water them every day otherwise they’ll die” (Scarlett 2020).

I have attached screenshots below of Scarlett’s vegetable grow boxes which were taken during our FaceTime call.
Figure 1. Screenshot of Scarlett’s vegetables and plants. Oxford, United Kingdom. Thursday 6th August 2020. Source: Author.
Figure 2. Screenshot of Scarlett’s tomatoes. Oxford, United Kingdom. Thursday 6th August 2020. Source: Author.
Scarlett and Emma were dealing with the effect of fairly recent health issues on their relationship with food. However for Mia, the complex relationship between her health and access to food took her back to her childhood. For example, Mia pointed out how “for a little while I viewed food as a bit of an enemy. You know cause when I was little, when I was a child, I only ever ate uhm my mother was so poor she spent her money on other things. So, I only ever ate chicken wings or chicken giblets every day and uh didn’t have any fruit. I’ve learnt a lot about I don’t know how to say it really that eating right-learning to eat right is not just the right thing for me, but it improves other aspects of my life little by little. Yeah so, sort of having food poverty as a child – uh [long pause] and it does mark you you know. You know it sort of like, you wonder if uhm you’ve got certain conditions because of lack of food or the wrong food. I don’t blame my then guardian or mother because she wasn’t that well herself…” (Mia 2020). This illustrates the long-term health effects of food insecurity/poverty and the knock-on effects of experiencing food insecurity/poverty as a child. Growth can be seen in Mia because she found that during the pandemic, she has not been viewing food as the enemy like she used to.
Food that fosters independence and bolsters the local economy during COVID-19

A common food-related lived experience amongst the individuals I interviewed was the interconnected theme of people growing food for themselves. This is evident in Figure 1. and Figure 2. where we see Scarlett’s vegetable patch. The effect of Scarlett having a vegetable patch and Evelyn assisting families with gardening has been to foster independence and show “people they can do it and providing people [with] supplies who are not in a financial position to start it [growing their own produce] because the tools and stuff are very very expensive…You know you don’t actually need like a fancy planter, you just need the confidence to-to do it…we’ve got one mom who like used her old little kiddie pool and she’s got this great vegetable garden now” (Evelyn 2020).

Ava demonstrated the link between the independence one achieves from growing their own produce and supporting local farmers and the local economy. For her, COVID-19 “has empowered people to go away and bake bread, to go away and grow in their back garden and that grows out of the link they have directly with the bread baker who’s coming to our market, the veg grower who’s coming to our market. So, there’s a direct link between where your food is coming from and what you end up with and how you might go away and see if you can generate it yourself” (Ava 2020).

Even though COVID-19 was a great opportunity for people to grow their own produce, it was also a time of inaccessibility of food for a whole host of reasons that are inclusive of but not limited to health issues. For example, Emma pointed out that at the beginning of lockdown she was not able to get food deliveries or had to wait weeks until she was put on the government’s priority list which was sent to supermarkets such as Tesco. For Evelyn and her neighbours who live far away from the shops and were used to going to the shops using
public transport before the pandemic, they suddenly could not get a bus and go to the shops – as they are a medically vulnerable family – which made it hard for them and some of their neighbours in similar situations to access groceries. Emma and Evelyn’s lived experiences contrasted with my discussion with Klara from East Oxford Farmers’ and Community Market who pointed out that “when people were fighting over eggs and flour in supermarkets we were just like ‘just the same here as normal, we have the-the chickens keep laying (laughs), uh you know local mills keep churning out more flour (laughs) we have that (continues to laugh)” (Klara 2020). Klara’s experience illustrates how COVID-19 has shown the need for a strong local economy as she said so herself that “It’s become very clear how important local markets are for local resilience” (Klara 2020).
Nationality and identity

A less common theme but one which is important nonetheless is how an individual’s identity and nationality can affect their food-related lived experiences during COVID-19. Aamaal is Turkish and found herself in an extremely complex situation whereby she realised that her and her family, who once used to have a weekly food shop of about £100, were now facing food insecurity at the same time as the arrival of her second child. In order to try and mitigate the effects of food insecurity, Aamaal applied for jobs, but as she explained to me “I passed the interviews and everything went really well but when I sent my like visa document, when I sent my passport I was rejected because uhm so it’s like hard to find a job as well even though you want to work uhm even though I had two kids…” (Aamaal 2020). For Aamaal and her family who are unable to receive government assistance (NRPF), food insecurity can be isolating as they have insecure residency status and are far away from the family they have always known. Therefore, for those “with no access to public funds, food banks are sometimes the only means of subsistence” (Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment 2020, p. 47).

Aamaal’s lived experience is also important as it illustrates how those experiencing food insecurity/poverty can feel like their food needs do not matter even though they do. For example, Aamaal explained why it is easier to ask for a vegetarian box rather than a Halal food box as she doesn’t “expect them (the food suppliers) to send any Halal food to be honest because it’s a huge amount of work and then it would add some extra burden for them to-to like uhm create boxes and uhm only for like Muslims or whatever so that was quite normal…With the Halal food it’s already hard to find Halal food here in the – in Oxford because Tesco doesn’t sell any Halal food unless you go to the Tesco in Cowley and there’s some like shops in Cowley where you can find Halal food. So, it’s already difficult so I
wasn’t expecting SOFEA to provide any Halal food to be honest” (Aamaal 2020). Aamaal has deemed her and her family’s needs as undeserving of being met. Perhaps this is a coping mechanism that allows Aamaal to deal with how hard it is to access Halal food when she does not live near Cowley and cannot afford to go to Cowley to buy food. Her statement also shows awareness of the logistical issues that would result in specialising food parcels, and how a lot of the food donated to the food services is surplus food that is left over from supermarket supply chains and therefore often a bit random. At the same time however, the implication of prioritising efficient service delivery on Aamaal and her family has been no dignity when accessing food since the beginning of COVID-19 which is when her and her family started experiencing food insecurity. This illustrates the limitations of relying on surplus food. Perhaps a solution will be to diversify the sources of food supply.
Recommendations and next steps

1) Community food services to become stronger through
   a. being better linked to what their local communities need and having the capacity to be responsive to this. For example; if their communities are elderly, they need to be able to deliver to them, if they are Muslim, they need the right dietary/Halal food options.

b. For this to be achieved, services need to have more stable sources of income, robust volunteer networks and volunteer processes, diverse and stable supply chains, operational processes that are COVID-19 safe and stable infrastructure in the form of premises, fridges and delivery vehicles.

c. Diversification of food parcels – this research found that for individuals, being able to inform a provider that they prefer vegetarian or Halal boxes provides some dignity in the process of accessing food. Having suggested this, I am aware that “COVID-19 restrictions have hampered services’ ability to meet nutritional needs” (Good Food Oxford 2020a). Perhaps organisations such as GFO can assist suppliers in identifying producers or suppliers who can assist in diversifying food parcels.

   i. In the event of a second wave of Coronavirus, the government must diversify the food parcels sent to the medically vulnerable to take into account that potatoes, tinned food and pasta are not adequate, nor do they afford dignity. The proposed boxes could range from a standard box, to a diabetic or vegetarian box for example. I am aware that this may be a difficult task for the government as they are less agile than smaller non-profit organisations. This challenge may be
overcome with increased links to local services, producers and smaller non-profit organisations.

2) Secondly, with assistance from GFO, Community Food Networks need to be widened to include local producers, local community growing projects and the local economy to ensure robust local supply chains. This will result in stronger local food supply chains that support the local economy and local needs.
Bibliography


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Appendix

The FIES Survey Module
The FIES-SM questions refer to the experiences of the individual respondent or of the respondent’s household as a whole. The questions focus on self-reported food-related behaviours and experiences associated with increasing difficulties in accessing food due to resource constraints.

During the last 12 months, was there a time when, because of lack of money or other resources:

1. You were worried you would not have enough food to eat?
2. You were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food?
3. You ate only a few kinds of foods?
4. You had to skip a meal?
5. You ate less than you thought you should?
6. Your household ran out of food?
7. You were hungry but did not eat?
8. You went without eating for a whole day?