# INCREASING DIGNITY AND REDUCING SHAME AND STIGMA:

## Toolkit for Food Projects

Birmingham
City Council

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FOOD REVOLUTION

A BOLDER HEALTHIER BIRMINGHAM

"Birmingham City Council is committed to supporting people who are experiencing food insecurity. This is demonstrated in our Food System Strategy, our response to the Cost of Living crisis and our launch and signing of the Food Justice Pledge.

We know that many people in Birmingham are experiencing food insecurity and so are having difficulty accessing affordable, nutritious food. Foodbanks and other food projects have become a vital safety net to our citizens, but we know that there are issues with sigma and dignity around their use. Therefore, I am pleased to present this toolkit for food projects, which I hope will support them to increase dignity and reduce shame and stigma for people visiting their projects. I remain grateful for the work that all these projects do in Birmingham to support people living in our city."

**Cllr Mariam Khan, Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care, Birmingham City Council**

"Access to adequate food is a basic human necessity. However, many people in our city of Birmingham rely on food support as a lifeline in these challenging times.

The Birmingham Food Justice Network is committed to providing food for individuals in a sensitive manner, whilst increasing dignity and reducing stigma, with the aim of food support being as accessible as possible to everyone who stands to benefit from the inclusive community environments provided by so many voluntary groups across the city.

Many models of best practice are worked to within the FJN groups, whilst food activities are on offer, groups intend to meaningfully engage with individuals, listening respectfully to what they say and signposting or referring to other support services as appropriate, leading to wrap-around support with the aim of long-term solutions out of food insecurity. Groups ensure that all volunteers and staff treat people fairly, with respect and dignity, including making sure that distribution of time, supplies and resources is fair. We hope this toolkit supports food projects in our network to continue to provide food to people in need in ways that are dignified and reduce shame and stigma"

**Florence Cadge, Food Justice Programmes Co-ordinator at The Active Wellbeing Society**
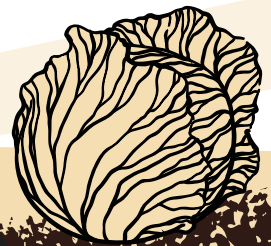
Thank you for taking the time to read this toolkit. We recognise the vital work that food projects are doing in the city and want to extend our gratitude for all that you do for Birmingham citizens, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis. We know that the food projects (such as foodbanks, food pantries, food clubs, social supermarkets, community cafés and on-street feeding groups) in our city are already working hard to create safe spaces where clients can be provided with food in a destigmatising way.

We recently undertook a review, 'addressing stigma and shame in use of affordable food models and foodbanks'. This review aimed to present factors which contribute to a sense of shame and stigma in using foodbanks and put forward recommendations in order to mitigate this and help people access the support they need without feeling ashamed. In this review, we looked at nearly 20 scientific papers in this area to provide an evidence base on this topic. We found that the primary reason for the stigma experienced by those struggling to afford food was the national narratives around foodbank use, along with negative encounters with the

welfare system. People tend to internalise these narratives and end up feeling that foodbank use is due to their own fault rather than because of factors beyond their control. Research has found that feelings of shame are highest before someone uses a foodbank, and then these feelings tend to decrease once they go into the foodbank. This is generally due to friendly staff/volunteers and meeting people in similar situations to them. The review also discusses factors specific to foodbanks and affordable food models (e.g. food pantries, food clubs, social supermarkets), which forms the backbone of this toolkit. This included the role that the physical environment can play in increasing dignity by making the food project a welcoming space, and the role that food projects can play in providing a social space where people can meet and share experiences. Additionally, a lack of food choice and poor-quality food were also shown to potentially increase feelings of shame. Finally, the review highlighted that the way to truly prevent the shame and stigma associated with foodbank use is to ensure people have enough money to afford food; while there are certain long-term actions that are key in supporting this, wraparound support is a useful tool in supporting

clients to this end. Throughout this review, we provided recommendations, many of which have been used to form this toolkit. We have also consulted with partners working in Birmingham and drawn inspiration from food projects we have visited.

We know that shame and stigma around food project use is still a live issue in our city, and we want to support food projects in taking steps to help increase dignity and decrease feelings of shame and stigma for clients using their services. That is why we have put together this short toolkit of steps that food projects can take to help increase dignity and decrease feelings of shame and stigma amongst their service users. We know that many food projects will be doing lots of these things already, and that some things won't be possible for a variety of reasons such as space, equipment, resources etc. Therefore these are suggestions to help you consider what might work for your project, rather than a checklist. We hope that you might be able to consider which of these you might be able to implement in your project if you are not doing them already!
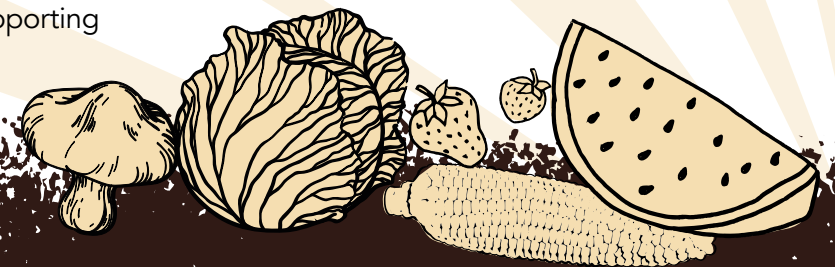
# 1. Creating a safe space for volunteers and clients

Fundamentally, it is vital that foodbanks and other food projects are safe spaces for volunteers and clients, and ensuring difficult situations are dealt with well and effectively can prevent awkward, unpleasant and potentially shameful experiences for those directly involved and those present.

1.1  Ensure safeguarding policies are in place, and there is a stated framework of action for how to deal with difficult behaviour. Discuss with the food project team to agree where to draw the line on difficult or unpleasant behaviour and write policies and procedures accordingly. Sometimes it can help to have a named and trained person to handle tricky situations. If your project is part of a network (e.g. The Trussell Trust), they may have example policies and procedures to follow. This can help create a safe environment.

1.2  Provide staff members & volunteers with training on how to deal with difficult scenarios where possible, including safeguarding training, de-escalation training and difficult conversation training. If you are part of a network (e.g. The Trussell Trust), they might put on this type of training.

If you are part of a place of worship, there may also be training as part of a local network (e.g. put on by the Diocese for the Church of England). Training volunteers can help them know how to handle potentially tricky situations and prevent awkward, unpleasant and potentially shameful experiences for those directly involved and those present.

1.3  Consider whether DBS checks for volunteers are appropriate for your food project. This can be determined by context on a role-by-role basis. For a role to be eligible for either a Standard or Enhanced Check the role requires "regular unsupervised (regulated) activity with minors or adults with care and support needs".  A regular volunteer role in a food project is unlikely to qualify for this level of check, but this may be good practice if there are regular clients or volunteers with the needs described. Considering what checks are needed for the people using the food project helps to create a safe environment for all.

1.4  Provide first aid training to staff/volunteers and ensure someone who is first aid trained is present. Have posters showing who the first aid-trained people are. This helps create a safe environment.

"Like any group or institution, emergency food providers have a duty of care towards everyone who interacts with them. Many of the people who seek support from your groups are vulnerable due to their circumstances and you must stay alert to any safeguarding issues that arise. Having a strong safeguarding culture within your group is vital to uphold people's dignity and must be modelled by everyone involved. In your role you are acting in a position of trust and by treating people you support with dignity and respect, and by actioning safeguarding concerns in an appropriate and timely manner, you help to safeguard that individual from possible abuse." – foodbank network lead

# 2. Creating a welcoming atmosphere

Often individuals feel most stigmatised prior to using a foodbank and then once they actually visit one, these feelings of shame abate. This diminishing of shame happens primarily due to two factors: the service's physical environment and the service's social environment.
The suggestions below can support you to make a welcoming atmosphere for clients.

2.1   Tailor language and communication used to advertise food projects so that use is framed positively and in a way that supports dignity. This can support people to use food aid if they need it.

2.2   Ensure people know where to go as they move through the food project, where toilets are etc. Clear signposting of the process of moving through the food project and where the toilets are can help people feel welcome quicker and decrease feelings of nervousness.

2.3   Provide hot drinks upon arrival. Studies suggested that things as simple and familiar as the sound of a kettle boiling or the smell of coffee could put them at ease.

2.4   Help people have somewhere to sit indoors to queue via a ticketed/'virtual' queueing system, rather than standing outside. Queuing outside a foodbank is seen as quite stigmatising, whereas being able to come in and sit down to 'queue' was seen as a more pleasant alternative.

2.5   Have tables with tablecloths and snacks on plates where people can wait. Again, these are simple things which help people feel more welcome and increased dignity.

2.6   Try to create a cosy and comfy environment where possible. Foodbank environments can often be large rooms and so a few cosy and comfy things such as cushions or tablecloths can help people feel more at ease.

2.7   Facilitate clients meeting and having the opportunity to grow relationships with each other, which can help provide an environment where similar struggles can be shared. One of the most destigmatising things that food projects can do is enable people to meet others going through similar things and have the chance to discuss and process together. Storytelling is a powerful way of destigmatising stereotypes around types of people accessing support.

2.8   Volunteers should be as kind, friendly and interested in clients as possible and not judge them or expect gratitude. There are documented instances in research papers (not based in Birmingham!) of volunteers and co-ordinators judging clients in stigmatising ways (e.g. moving them down the queue if they thought their children weren't well behaved enough or if they thought they were being too picky) or expecting gratitude from individuals (e.g. asking them to say thank you).

2.9   Provide opportunities for clients to give feedback around their experiences of the food project and make (even small) changes based on their suggestions. This can be empowering and increase dignity.

"I think it's very easy to take for granted what a warm meal and a warm drink can do to a person's mood. I'm very grateful for this help. It's not just the food that makes a difference, but the kindness and compassion of all the volunteers who serve it. They make me feel like I matter, and that means everything to me. [It gives] me hope and a reason to keep going." – food aid user in Birmingham

# 3. Decreasing shame associated with provision of food

For some, getting food for free or as part of charity can lead to people experiencing feelings of shame and stigma, especially when coupled with national narratives around use of food aid. Working towards as 'normal' a food aid experience as possible (similar to how people would experience obtaining food if they could afford to shop at a supermarket) can increase dignity amongst food aid users.

3.1 Ensure food is not past the use-by date. Food projects should not be distributing or cooking with food that is past its 'use by' date. This is unsafe and can also increase feelings of shame associated with accessing food projects. Food past its 'best before' date can be used.

3.2 Throw away or compost off/rotting food (even if it is within its 'use by' date) rather than giving it out and ensure that food given out to people is of good quality. Receiving poor quality food can increase feelings of shame associated with accessing food projects.

3.3 Try to ensure food parcels have foods which go together in a meal when they are packed by volunteers or given out, and help people understand how to prepare foods. Recipe cards or simply having a few examples of what to cook with foods (especially fresh vegetables) can help them feel more confident about cooking that food. Receiving food that doesn't go together (unlike doing a shop with a shopping list) or not knowing how to cook foods can increase feelings of shame.

3.4 Ask about dietary requirements and preferred foods to give people a preference or choice of food where possible. A lack of choice or culturally appropriate food (especially where there are dietary requirements) can also be stigmatising. Receiving food they like and that is appropriate for them can increase dignity.

3.5 Include things in the food parcel which make things easier to cook eg. vegetable oil, salt, spices. Again, this can support them to cook tasty food with the food provided; eating food that isn't desirable because they are struggling to afford better options can be stigmatising.

3.6 Provide or signpost to other services, such as cooking classes, and other affordable food models where individuals have more of a choice and can pay low prices of food. Together, food projects can support individuals and empower them.

3.7 Integrating growing into food projects can increase dignity. Being involved in growing food that is then eaten and enjoyed can increase dignity and understanding of food. Consider whether you have the space and ability to be able to encourage people to grow through your food project.

# 4. Fostering dignity and choice through affordable food models

Given the potentially stigmatising nature of the lack of choice of food given out for free at a foodbank, there may be a role for other affordable food models in addition to foodbanks. While foodbanks may continue to be needed for those experiencing acute food crises, other models which allow people to pay for food in some way may provide a halfway house between using a foodbank and purchasing food at normal price in a shop.

4.1 Consider whether you could run a food pantry, food club or social supermarket (i.e. an affordable food model) alongside your foodbank. Generally, individuals can choose what food to buy which increases dignity. Best practice is when these can be run alongside foodbanks (e.g. in the same building) so people can shift to the affordable food model when they are able to.

4.2 Consider whether pay as you can (or feel) options might be appropriate for your food project. Pay as you can/feel options may enable more people to utilise these services as they can 'pay' with time, such as volunteering themselves or litter-picking. Paying for food, whether by money or other services, may destigmatise using affordable food models and increase dignity of individuals needing help to afford food.

4.3 Signpost to affordable food models if possible. If it isn't possible to run a food pantry, food club or social supermarket alongside your foodbank, find out if there are any near you and signpost to them. Here is a map of food projects in Birmingham to help with this: **Birmingham Food Justice Network Map**

**"As an autistic woman coordination in cooking is difficult. When at [the] pantry someone helps me navigate all the fresh and chilled items and helps me put them together in a way to cook so I will not need to use too many appliances. I find supermarkets overwhelming. Knowing my £5 will buy me a range of goods means I don't have to think about the individual cost of items. I know I can get fresh healthy meals for that. I can manage to feed my family without becoming overwhelmed or buying junk"** – food pantry user in Birmingham

# 5. Preventing foodbank use through holistic support

Fundamentally, use of foodbanks arises because people are not able to afford food, which in itself is perceived as shameful and stigmatising. Thus, providing people with the means to afford food by addressing the root causes of poverty is the only way to truly prevent foodbank use and the shame and stigma associated with it, through a variety of longer term approaches such as adequate benefit payments and fair wages and cash-first approaches. Food projects can support this by providing wraparound support for clients and seeking to support them holistically.

5.1 Provide wraparound services where possible e.g. debt advice, benefit maximisation etc. This can support people to afford food by boosting their income and providing them with support to help address the root causes of poverty.

5.2 Recognise that people using foodbanks may also have wider health and wellbeing issues, including mental health issues. Signpost to support where possible. Supporting people holistically can increase their dignity.

5.3 Provide safe spaces for confidential/1-1 conversations. Striking the balance between communal spaces and spaces for smaller conversations can help provide personal, wraparound support to people as they need it by giving different opportunities to open up, helping them to get the support they need in a dignified way.

**"Providing wraparound support for residents at a time of crisis when they access a food bank is vitally important as we can ensure we are maximising there income and dealing with any debts they may have, by doing this we are reducing the stigma of them accessing the foodbank and ensuring we do this in a manner that is dignified which promotes wellbeing and a sense trust in the work we are doing."** – foodbank co-ordinator in Birmingham

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