

Lewes District Food Partnership

FEELING THE PINCH

Unique insights & ideas from lived
experience of the cost-of-living crisis

2023



Welcome to Feeling the Pinch! - Have Your Say

'Feeling the Pinch! Have Your Say' is an innovative participatory project designed to give ordinary people from across Lewes District the opportunity to share their stories and experiences of the cost of living crisis.

Over two months, 11 local residents, each with their own lived experience of financial struggle, met fortnightly for interactive workshops. Together they explored the challenges they faced and the ways they had found to survive. They then moved on to identify the systemic problems which underlay their personal experiences and develop recommendations about what needs to change.

This phase of our work concluded with an 'Inequality Truth Hearing' bringing our Expert Panel together with representatives from local councils, the voluntary and statutory sectors. The result was a fascinating and powerful discussion, with lots of lively, respectful interaction and generation of ideas for practical next steps.

This short report gives an insight into our process and findings.



Key messages

We've been blown away by the passion, resilience and dedication shown by our participants. Each was keen to tell their story, not only for themselves but for their families and communities.

Our participants wanted policy makers not only to hear their stories, but to respond by working with them to identify solutions. Their recommendations included:

- Improved access to information, advice and guidance to help people navigate the welfare and benefits system
- Interactions with services that are led with compassion and dignity
- Policy development should start with meaningful community consultation
- Let's End Poverty! - by listening to people who know and taking action

Why an Inequality Truth Hearing?

The UK has been experiencing a cost-of-living crisis – an extended period during which the cost of everyday essentials like food and bills increases more quickly than average household income - since late 2021. Although the cost-of-living crisis affects us all, people on lower incomes are disproportionately impacted. For many, this compounds difficulties already experienced through the effects of the UK Government’s ‘Austerity’ programme of public sector and welfare cuts, along with the COVID-19 pandemic.

'Feeling the Pinch: Have Your Say!' is part of [Lewes District Food Partnership's \(LDFP\)](#) work to raise awareness about food poverty in our area. LDFP coordinates an Emergency Food Network, made up of 12 organisations offering food aid across the district. Through feedback from network members, we recognised that the cost-of-living crisis was impacting most on people who had least to start with, and that the experiences of those residents need to be amplified. If we only refer to the *number* of people living in food insecure households, there is a danger of real-life stories being homogenised. Furthermore, if only people in positions of power speak on behalf of residents this risks perpetuating misconceptions and myths around food insecurity, because they are not speaking from lived



experience. First-hand experience of struggling to make ends meet brings a distinctive type of expertise.

It's important for policy makers and citizens that the impact of local and national policies is fully understood. To do that, it is vital that we make sure we fully understand the nuanced experiences of people living in food insecure households.

There are a number of concerted efforts nationally and globally to put lived-experiences centre stage, including Poverty Truth Commissions and Church Action on Poverty's Speaking Truth to Power programme. Drawing on this work and with funding from Sustainable Food Places, we aimed to achieve something meaningful in a comparatively short amount of time – a first, and achievable, step towards incorporating the voices of lived experience in the work of LDFP and using our networks to connect with those in positions of wider influence.

"I feel more connected, more hopeful, in touch with other people and the community."

What did we do?

Recruiting the Expert Panel

Recognising that ordinary people are the experts of their own lives, we sought to recruit an 'Expert Panel' of residents from across Lewes District. There were no criteria for taking part other than being over 18, living in Lewes District and being happy to talk about one's experience of the cost-of-living crisis.

We visited various community groups and food banks across Lewes District to build relationships with potential participants, as well as promoting the project via Lewes District Council and on social media.

We actively sought to ensure our Expert Panel represented as wide a range of different ages, personal characteristics and life experiences as possible, in particular covering the different areas of Lewes District (urban coastal strip, Lewes town and surrounding villages). The selection of recruitment locations helped to ensure that the project was advertised and accessible particularly to those on low incomes¹. You can find out more about the people who did take part in the next section.

Participative Workshops

We hosted four interactive discussions at broadly two-week intervals over May-June 2023.

Workshops were designed to allow participants to get to know each other, build confidence in speaking in the group, develop their ideas and share their stories.

Each workshop focused on the strengths of the participants and how they successfully manage the challenges and barriers that they face. This asset-based perspective draws on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, which emphasises that everyone has strengths and capabilities and that we all have strategies to get by, making rational choices and weighing the benefits and risks.

Discussions covered four broad themes:

- Who are we?
- What matters to us?
- What needs to change?
- And how?

In each workshop, careful facilitation ensured conversations were led by participant concerns, focusing specifically on rising costs, falling/stagnating incomes and the specific challenges this posed for food access and affordability. Not all participants were able to attend each workshop, so the discussion themes were staggered. Recapping themes at the start of each session allowed all participants to contribute to each theme area, whilst also providing an opportunity to extend and deepen the discussion.

Inequality Truth Hearing

The four workshops built towards an 'Inequality Truth Hearing'. This session was carefully designed to bring our Expert Panel together with representatives from local councils, the voluntary and statutory sectors, to share their stories and discuss their findings and conclusions. Invitations to attend were sent to a range of local institutions, including elected political representatives and council officers, as well as non-governmental organisations. The session was full to capacity. Unfortunately our local MP chose not to attend.

"an appliance
breaking down
shouldn't mean
a nervous
breakdown"

1/4 of UK adults have less than
£100 in savings - meaning
they cannot afford sudden &
essential costs like a washing
machine breaking down



source: moneyandpensionsservice.org.uk (2022)

"you never realise how easy it is
to be made homeless until you
are. When you've been homeless
you always feel homeless."



Twenty-six percent of young people (aged
16–25) had slept rough at some point in
their life and 35 percent had 'sofa
surfing' (stayed with friends or family on
their floor or sofa because they had
nowhere else to go).

source: Centre for Housing & Planning Research
(2016)

"you learn to be invisible, to
be less than yourself"

Feeling like you have lost your identity is a common theme amongst people experiencing food & financial struggles. You lose agency when decisions are made for you and about you, you feel judged when accessing support and learn coping mechanisms like "becoming invisible" to deal with the trauma.

What we heard

Who are we?

11 people took part in the project in total. We used a simple interactive tool to facilitate conversation about who we were and what our household was like. This revealed some striking similarities between the participants, including a high prevalence of health issues (both physical and mental) and unpaid caring responsibilities. Some participants had paid work, mostly part-time. Others were retired and/or full-time carers. All had extensive experience of navigating the welfare system.



What matters to us?

As participants introduced themselves and shared more about who they are, the things that matter to them surfaced quickly. We grouped the issues into themes, then considered how they related to each other. Key themes included the ways in which insecure housing, rising costs and complicated benefit systems all contribute to people struggling to afford the basics and being left with little or no savings. This created particular problems, and anxiety, when participants were faced with an unexpected bill or broken household appliance.

Together we began to sketch out how illness, caring responsibilities and additional needs all compounded these issues, particularly when families found it difficult to access the healthcare and other support they needed.

What became clear was the ways in which these issues contribute to an increased sense of 'insecurity and fear', not just amongst individuals but in the whole community. Participants reported that the psychological impacts of experiencing poverty have long-lasting effects on how they view and engage with the world around them, particularly in increasing a sense of social isolation. Negative impacts on mental and physical health often followed, together with increased anxiety and/or aggression, for individuals, in families and in the wider community.

A common issue was what could be described as a 'cascade effect', with participants describing how having little to no resources (financial, housing, even family support could be considered here) diminishes their ability to deal with life's unexpected hurdles, and the pile-on of difficulties might push them from 'just about coping' to 'not coping at all'. Many participants shared how they have quickly found themselves relying on food banks or facing homelessness due to this cascade effect.



"I do have mental health conditions which have been exacerbated by the financial climate. There is constant stress & worry, will I fall too far behind on my rent & become homeless? How will I ever pay off my debts? Can I top up the electric meter this week? What happens if I get ill & how on earth am I going to manage as I get older? The worry is constant."

What needs to change and how?

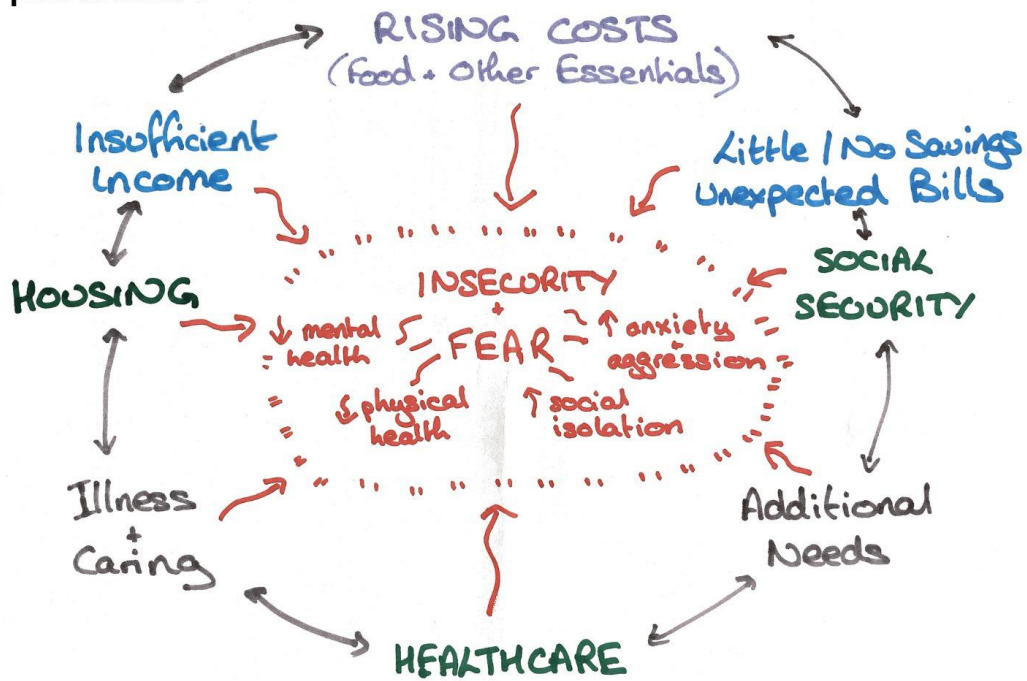
Participants expressed that they understand that the price of food and fuel is going up and suggested some reasons why this might be the case: the climate emergency, the Ukraine conflict, Brexit, rising inflation etc. However some said that it feels like the wool is being pulled over their eyes as to how to manage it and many voiced the frustration of being told to manage their budget better when there just isn't enough to get by on.

Participants were clear that they know there is no magic pill and that many changes require a change of national policy. However, all participants were keen to have honest, public conversations about the realities of the cost of food outstripping income.

Taking each of the major theme areas in turn, we discussed what might be done together with which actors, locally, regionally and nationally might be able to respond and how. Here are some things that participants said during the workshops:

Income Insufficiency, Rising Costs, and Having Little to No Savings	Housing	Social Security and Benefits
<p>There should be an accepted minimum needed to live on which includes being able to put money away for savings in case of emergencies.</p> <p>Government Budgeting Loans/Grants were scrapped – people shouldn't need them, but what happens if they do? We should avoid making a bad situation worse by incurring high interest debt.</p> <p>Price guarantee on essential items like bread, milk, eggs so people can afford a healthy diet. Living off food-bank food can cause long term malnutrition.</p> <p>Considerate planning: not everyone that lives in areas that are considered wealthy are actually wealthy, there is hidden poverty everywhere so there needs to be shopping options suitable for all.</p>	<p>Everyone should have a right to a decent home, that they feel secure and in control of.</p> <p>There should be an audit to see how many houses are empty and bring them back in to use.</p> <p>Incentivize moving out of a house which has become too large after children move out so that new families can benefit.</p> <p>Provide more social and affordable housing or other housing alternatives such as co-operatives.</p> <p>Housing should be well-maintained, too many people are living with mould and subsequent respiratory problems.</p> <p>Increase the local authority housing allowance, some people are left with very little after rent is paid from UC.</p>	<p>The system should provide a minimum income which is measured against the cost of living – which is not how it is currently decided.</p> <p>See The Trussell Trust #GuaranteeOurEssentials Campaign</p> <p>Cost of Living Payments which are unpredictable and 'degrading' were introduced after UC uplift removed, people much prefer having control so they can budget themselves.</p> <p>"Flip" the system – so that it works in favour of people needing help, rather than against them. Avoiding having to prove how much you need help, or how poorly you are. Some benefits are automatically allocated, why can't they all be?</p>

Theme Map - post Session 3



"I have a lasting fear of authority, I'm genuinely fearful of accessing services, I just bury my head in the sand."



Annie's Story

Annie is a lone parent with long term health issues who described how she was struggling financially for a long time before this cost-of-living crisis. She points to changes in the welfare system including heavier conditions for single parents who claim benefits and the changes to Universal Credit causing significant financial difficulties for her.

She's noticed that price increases have made things worse; whereas before she was just about coping, she feels she is "constantly playing catch-up" now and some months has to rely on food banks and constantly worries about the gas/electric meter running out.

Whilst incredibly grateful of the help from the food bank she said after a few weeks she "starts to feel sluggish and heavy" as the food is mostly tinned or dried foods. She said "we're always being told about the importance of eating healthily, especially in schools but this is useless when people aren't able to access healthy food".

Financial insecurity has had an impact on her social life and relationships: "I can't afford to meet people socially and it feels like the main topic of conversation with family members is money. It's caused friction between me and my daughter that I know would not be there if we were comfortably off, or could at least consistently afford the basics".

Other participants in the Feeling the Pinch project mentioned family breakdowns and tensions in relationships as a result of financial struggles.

"I do get some hope from projects like Feeling the Pinch, because it helps me to feel at least someone is listening"

Annie asks that the government and people in power "actually listen to the ordinary people. How much more productivity do they suppose they can get from a society which is at breaking point?"



When asked what Annie would like for herself in the future she said "decent living environment and quality of life, maybe even the odd meal out and a holiday, to be able to treat the ones I love occasionally. Ultimately, instead of just about surviving, I would like to be able to thrive".

The Inequality Truth Hearing

On the 27th of June over 25 community partners came together to listen to our expert panel and discuss what can be done locally. Stakeholders included town, district and county council, third sector organisations such as Citizen's Advice Bureau and Homelink Charity, the chamber of commerce, local enterprises, housing officers, and local and national food charities and campaign groups.

Quotes from the workshops and the stories of our participants were exhibited in the space. We introduced the project and the initial findings from the workshops, then there was a chance to feedback thoughts and impressions from the exhibits. Each table had at least two members of our expert panel, who contributed their experiences to the discussions.

Later in the session the tables were each allocated a key theme: Housing, Access to Social Security and Insufficient Income to see what high-level goals would make a difference both locally and nationally.

One positive consequence of this project has been the impact it has had on the participants just from taking part. The power of being listened to and of feeling like their voices were valuable led to participants expressing that they now "feel less shame", that being able to speak up about what is happening to them and hear from others in the same boat has allowed them to "not blame myself anymore, I used to stand in the supermarket and think it was my fault, that I was doing something wrong and hadn't budgeted properly, but now I know it's not my fault and there are others experiencing the same as me", finally one participant said they "felt flattered so many people came to hear their stories".

Feedback from the Panel and Community Partners

- 100% of participants agreed that participating in the project made them feel that their experiences and expertise matter and more confident to share their experiences of food insecurity.
- 100% of participants said they would be 'more likely' to take part in future community engagement projects.
- 100% of community partners rated the Inequality Truth Hearing as 'very good' or 'great'.

"I have really enjoyed speaking up and talking, understanding that people are in similar situations."

"It was interesting to meet the guests at the final session and to realise that the same issues are affecting a wide variety of people. I was very nervous and had to be careful that I didn't think they were better than me."

"I would like to see these sessions embedded in regular council timetabled meetings."

"Personal testimonies are invaluable and empowering."

"[I feel] more determined than ever to do what I can to help."



Cuts to services have left people fending for themselves, coupled with having additional needs or long-term health conditions this often leaves vulnerable people unsure about the support that is on offer as they try to navigate an overly-complicated system.

"it's an absolute minefield, I can't deal with all the palaver of it, searching up, scrolling through, then struggling to apply for it"



"all our time and effort is spent on existing - I don't feel like part of society, I feel like I'm on the outside looking in"

"when you're struggling your kids have to grow up quicker and they're more insecure"

The number of UK children in food poverty has nearly doubled in the last year to almost 4 million

source: the Guardian (2023)



What Are Our Panel Asking For?

The Inequality Truth Hearing identified a number of key asks. These can be summarised:

Improved access to information, advice and guidance

There was acknowledgement that support services can differ from town to town and provision is inconsistent across the district. One participant described how useful it had been having access to a social prescriber, whilst other participants noted there was no equivalent support service in their town. Social prescribers, community navigators, community champions and specialist advice services such as Citizens Advice all support better access to benefits.

We ask that Lewes District Council reviews and improves access to information, advice and guidance – and in particular that views of residents with lived experience, especially those served by local emergency food providers, are central to any review and/or design of new provision.

Interactions with services should be led with compassion and dignity

The experience of seeking help can at best be confusing and at worst be traumatic. Some participants shared horror stories of asking for help, including feeling that there was a risk of their children being taken due to them facing homelessness. Time and again the panel spoke of the burden of proof that lies upon people to ‘prove they need help’ and that they often experience a culture of suspicion.

We ask that the statutory and voluntary sector embeds trauma-informed training in their services to ensure that people are met with compassion. Where possible services should seek to adopt and embody principles of dignified food support.

Policy development should start with meaningful community consultation

This project has shown that residents are keen to engage but that there are many barriers to doing so. Those offering opportunities to engage must consider whether all is being done to remove those barriers.

We ask for more regular and wide-reaching opportunities to engage with policy and local decision making and ask that consultation should not be a box-ticking exercise but designed so to genuinely seek the active (and ongoing) participation of residents.

Let's End Poverty!

This project has begun to develop meaningful insights into the factors that cause and exacerbate the indignity and hardship of Lewes District residents living with chronic low-income. It is crucial that policy actors, at all levels, move beyond ‘sticking plaster’ approaches which just address the symptoms of poverty to identifying and tackling the root causes.

We ask that our emerging findings regarding income insufficiency, housing and social security and benefits (see p8) are taken seriously and taken forward by those with policy influence. We also recommend that all local partners sign up to the Let's End Poverty campaign -

<https://letsendpoverty.co.uk/>

What's next?

- Keeping lived-experiences centre stage, seeking to ensure that (whenever possible) the work of Lewes District Food Partnership and our local partners is developed in consultation with those that know first-hand about the realities of living on a low-income.
- Pop-up exhibitions across Lewes District to engage members of the public with the project and keeping the conversation going.
- Findings shared widely community partners and other professionals through meetings and presentations, including engagement with services such as Adult Social Care and East Sussex County Council Financial Inclusion subgroup.
- Shift narrative away from emergency 'sticking plaster' support to working towards the goals of increasing access to support advice and information, ensuring interactions are dignified and compassionate, increasing opportunities for community engagement in decision making.
- Secure further funding to continue to develop and expand the project to hear from more local residents and develop an ongoing panel for consultation.
- Ensure that lived experience feeds into a local food strategy that promotes food security and resilience.

We are seeking to disseminate our Panel's findings and recommendations widely, including public displays and events, presentations to key stakeholder groups and consultation with local services.

"We all have a different story, but we're all connected."

Acknowledgements

Feeling The Pinch! Have Your Say was funded by a Participatory Processes grant from Sustainable Food Places, a partnership programme led by the Soil Association, Food Matters and Sustain, which brings together food partnerships across the UK. The participatory methodology used draws on Church Action on Poverty's "Speaking Truth to Power" programme.

Our work would not have been possible without the contribution of our amazing panel of participants with lived experience – Claire, Hannah, Helen, Gemma, Geoff, Laura, Louise, Phaedra, Teresa and Shelley. We're also grateful to all those who attended our Inequality Truth Hearing including representatives from Citizen's Advice, Care for the Carers, East Sussex County Council, Food Matters, The Foundry Healthcare, Lewes Chamber of Commerce and Lewes District Council.

About us

Lewes District Food Partnership brings people, communities & organisations together to create better food systems for everyone. Sustainable food businesses, local growers & producers, emergency food providers, food waste activists & social eating spaces – a food partnership connects the dots. LDFP works in East Sussex alongside four other district & borough level food partnerships and feeds into a county wide food strategy, led by Public Health East Sussex.

Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA) is a community development charity aiming to build stronger, healthier, more inclusive communities. We make a difference in our communities by reducing loneliness and social isolation, improving health and wellbeing, and increasing economic stability. SCDA is a multi-purpose locally rooted organisation based in Newhaven.

Jane Perry is an experienced social researcher based in Sussex, who is passionate about making sure the voices of people who know best can be heard by those who make decisions. Jane sits on the LDFP steering group and is Vice Chair of Fitzjohns Foodbank in Lewes.

Ruby Makepeace-Somerville is the Lewes District Food Partnership coordinator at Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA).

Stef Lake is the community development & health programme manager at SCDA. She chairs the Lewes District Food Partnership steering group, and the Lewes District Emergency Food Network. Stef specialises in community responses to food insecurity which centre dignity.

To discuss 'Feeling The Pinch! Have Your Say' further, please email ruby@sussexcommunity.org.uk

To find out more about our participatory methodology, please email janeperry@live.co.uk



www.lewesdistrictfoodpartnership.org