The ‘Food as a Lifestyle Motivator’ (FLM) project is an exploratory pilot project that has used creative methods to gain insight into the food practices, needs and preferences of service users at Devonport Lifehouse homeless centre, a Salvation Army homeless centre in Plymouth.

The project gained funding through an Institute for Sustainability Solutions Research (ISSR) small collaborative award in May 2014, since when it has successfully gained momentum.

The project has fostered a strong multi-disciplinary team ethos that has permitted integrated, but diverse, interpretation of the project findings, leading to a range of themes pertinent to the service users’ food experiences, providing a holistic view of some of the many determinants of food choice and poverty.

From my own ‘critical dietetic’ perspective, this project has consolidated the evidence that highlights the homeless community as being diverse and experiencing multiple vulnerabilities. We know that food is central to many health issues, but this pilot project has shown that for those on the fringes of society, food has the potential to be a powerful lifestyle motivator.

The findings of this pilot study illustrate that food holds meaning and marks identity; it also exerts emotion and can express both power and empowerment; its environment can be space and social place; it provides meaningful occupation.

The participatory methods that we have developed seek to address some of the power imbalances that arise because of inequalities, enabling marginalized groups to gain more control over their food choices. Through this pilot phase, we have given a voice to the service users and strengthened local partnerships with key centres, all of whom already use food activities to support socially-excluded individuals. The potential impact of this work should not be underestimated – it aligns with local priorities, for example, Plymouth’s 10 year inequalities strategy to support positive health-enabling choices. It also serves to enhance health and wellbeing in these communities to strengthen social assets, promote social sustainability and tackle social justice.

To explore food experiences and behaviours, nine participants photographed their own food activities throughout the day over a ten day period and were then invited to reflect upon the experience through focused discussions with the members of the research team.

The photos were used in this way to elicit meanings, feelings and associations around
food encounters. The intention was to retain the ability for photographs to elicit dialogic engagement and opportunities for expression around food in keeping with the dominant ethos of ‘beyond text’ methodologies. In the philosophy of the FLM aims, it was necessary to give participants a ‘voice’ - the opportunity for a sense of agency and empowerment as well as a novel way of relating to food.

The following case studies exemplify the power of photo-elicitation to give voice to the participants’ experiences. Although our analysis was based on the spoken conversations around the images, the photographs speak powerfully from the participants’ own perspective and on their own terms.

These are presented together with pen portraits*, relevant I-poem excerpts and quotes from participants. The I-Poems have been constructed from the discussions and conversations elicited from the photographs taken by the participants and provide potent insight into feelings of empowerment/disempowerment as experienced by service users.

Dr Clare Pettinger

* Pen portraits provide anonymous pseudonyms and describe the ‘characters of the story’, in the service users own agreed words., thus personalising our participants
Case study: Ross

Ross is a 34 year-old white British male from London who has lived at Devonport Lifehouse since November 2013 as well as on three previous occasions in recent years. His current stay in Devonport Lifehouse followed a short prison sentence during which he lost his private rented accommodation. Ross has a teenage son by a previous relationship and has a new partner who has just given birth to a baby girl. Ross’s has diabetes and is overweight. He was formerly a heavy drinker but drinks very moderately now. Whilst at the centre he has achieved NVQ Levels 1 and 2 in Catering and his aspiration is to be a full-time chef. Having worked in the past as a delivery driver and doorman, Ross is currently employed part time as relief cook and night receptionist at Devonport Lifehouse. As well as being passionate about cooking, his interests include rugby, soccer and socialising.

Quotes

“... food has become a major part of my life. I really enjoy cooking, actually it beat the demons in my head..... Look how far I've come... I just go in there... I like to try different things...” (Ross)

“....even on the days when I don't have to go in I can still go in and keep myself busy, keeps me occupied, instead of going away with the lads and having a drink, you know what I mean? So, it's a good thing. Really is good. Pictures of the garden as well as that's a big part of my cooking...” (Ross)

“As soon as the guys go and do anything in the kitchen, they're like yeah! You know? In catering there's always options. There is options out there if they could get the training.” (Ross)

“Yeah it's always about learning. That's what I like about cooking. You always learn something new everyday with it...we have shown people and they have come along really well” (Ross)

I-Poem by Ross

We do have events
We’ll have a little look
We do try
I mean
We put our best
I first come here
I was a resident
I got the opportunity
I just progresses
I really enjoy cooking
I've gone
Turning myself around
I've done
I've had
From you
I mean
I have to go up
I made some
should have gone
I didn't go
I made the recipe
Myself
We got to have
We get extra
I suppose
I mean
I've got a little family
I'm still
I'm working Christmas
You can put me down
We started
I think
We started
You're hungry
You know
You can grab
Yourself a sandwich
I'd just done
I made some
...I think
I mean
We work
We do it
I've done it
Case study: Paul

Paul is a 38 year-old white British male originally from Yorkshire but living in Plymouth for 19 years. He is single and has one teenage child from a past relationship. Paul left school at 16 with no formal qualifications and worked as a labourer. He came to Devonport Lifehouse three months ago having become homeless as a result of his mother’s death which forced him to leave the home that he shared with her and which had been in her name. Before his mother’s death, Paul was her carer and he now has no immediate relatives. Paul’s major interest and his ‘best friend’ is his nine year-old dog Bella. Prior to and overlapping with owning Bella, Paul had her father as a pet for about 16 years.

Quotes

“I like me dog food as well. She needs it. I make sure she’s fed. She’s my priority. I’d rather go without then see her go without. But it never happens here anyway. She never goes without here!” (Paul)

“It were something different. I’ve never done anything like that [All Ways Apples food event] before… A lot of people said that they enjoyed the bread. A lot of people like the bread. The quiche were nice…yeah, I enjoyed it” (Paul)

“Well, I’ve always been interested in cooking and Gillian is happy for me to go along to cooking. I thought yeah I’ll give it a go. I enjoy it you know. We make some nice things” (Paul)

“I like Blackberry crumble…my Mum used to make that years ago” (Paul)
I don’t like eggs
I don’t like the yolk
I like blackberries
I have done
I have done
We used to have it
I just can’t stand them
You would if you drank enough
I used to buy
I was even begging
I had no benefits
I used to go to
I’d end up begging
You know just to get food
You get the horrible people
I was sleeping in a doorway
I had her dad before
I can always remember

I were growing up
You know at school
We used to take
I always remember that
I saw it
We used to do
You get all your vegetables
You get some people
I think the food’s okay
I do
I even go
Have cooking lessons don’t I
I’ve always been interested
I thought
I’ll give it a go
I enjoy it
You know

Case study: Jeffrey

Jeffrey is a 62 year-old white British male who has lived at Devonport Lifehouse for nine months. He is single but was previously in a relationship which broke down when his health deteriorated and he was unable to work. He subsequently became homeless. Jeffrey has three grown-up children and two grandchildren. He has a number of health issues including heart failure but has no addictions. Jeffrey was a fully-apprenticed construction engineer and worked and travelled widely in Africa and Europe. He describes himself as an “ex-hippie”. His interests include the outdoors and music.
“....It was just the idea of, trying to portray the history of your meal from start to finish, you know from the wild animal to the dish at the end. That was the picture that I wanted to portray....” (Jeffrey)

“Then I sort of say a history of a meal (shows photos), then I went to the materials used in preparation and then all sorts of different desserts. And at the end I sit down with a nice cup of tea. Your meal is complete then. In my head just to do a history of a meal from the raw beginning to a cup of tea and a cigarette and that's just how I saw it...” (Jeffrey)

“A lot of people in here don’t always have the opportunity to put their feelings, their thoughts or whatever out to the staff and who can return something back and that's what I think is necessary. Most people here just sit and listen -- and this sort of thing (points to photo)...if you can make it creative. You know just get it out” (Jeffrey)

"I-Poem by Jeffrey"

Can we?
I can’t stand chillies
Can’t think of much I dislike
That’s the way I look at it
When I was living away
We used to keep
You could grow everything
Everything you ate was fresh
You know where it is
What you can do
We cook up a big meal
I was doing some
I said to the owner
I said
You’ve got to be joking
I said to him how
Can you call that free range?
I got used to it
I was working in Ireland
You can get Liffy water
I don’t know
I mean a pint of Guinness
We had someone
You just leave them
Case study: Hassan

Hassan is a 45-year-old Somali male who has lived at Devonport Lifehouse at least five times over the last seven years, including a brief period in 2014. He is a Muslim.

Quotes

“I know about these potatoes...there are types that can grow by the sea. It is heritage...a matter of culture that decides what’s healthy or not...” (Hassan)

I-Poem by Hassan

I like toast
I don’t like
I’m a Muslim
I don’t eat bacon
I go round
You say
You don’t
I have
I don’t know
I did not like
I’ve been here before
I don’t know
I’ve tried
You can’t smell it
You say
You don’t like

Case study: Nemo

Nemo is a 43-year-old white male with dual Australian and British nationality. He has been at Devonport Lifehouse for six months. Born in Australia, Nemo spent periods of his childhood in Germany and Yorkshire with family as well as 18 months in a children’s home in Liverpool. He came to Devon in 2002. Nemo has no close relatives, was married at 18, and is now divorced but in a new relationship. His highest qualification is a BA in Philosophy. His pastimes include writing poetry and prose and painting. His last work was in a food factory in 1999. Nemo has epilepsy, asthma and a number of mental health issues, including PTSD following an assault, which led to his homelessness. He feels institutionalised, and has problems dealing with crowds. Nemo is a recovering intravenous drug user and is on a Methadone script. He has recently taken to tackle a serious problem with his dental health.
Q U O T E S

“The people who work on serving food know that I don’t eat that much, but the food is really quite good. Most of the time you couldn’t ask for better…” (Nemo)

“…I’ve taken a picture of food before I eat it, a picture of food after I’ve eaten it and whatever’s left is the food I can’t eat…” (Nemo)

“The food we get is generally really good.....They are really restricted on the amount of funding they get. The guys do wonders really...some of the food is so outstanding, it’s restaurant quality. You just don’t expect it in a place like this” (Nemo)

I - P O E M  B Y  N E M O

I wanted to make a food diary
I’m eating
I’m not eating
I can’t eat in the dining room
I’m scared of crowds
I have problems
I hate bad manners
We get
I mean
I think it was
You can’t beat it Sundays
You get Chinese
You just don’t expect it
I eat on a week
I’ve taken a picture
I eat it
Case study: Jim

Jim is a 59 year-old white British male and is single with no children. He has lived all his life in Plymouth and enjoys walking in areas such as the Hoe. His last work was as a fully-qualified plumber and he once ran his own business. He has been at Devonport Lifehouse for two years. Jim became homeless through loss of employment and difficulties in coping with the benefits system which led him to lose his accommodation. He has a sister in Cornwall and a brother in New Zealand but no relatives with whom he is in close touch. Jim was a heavy drinker in the past but this is not a problem for him now. He spends a lot of time volunteering in the Devonport Lifehouse kitchen which he appreciates as it keeps him busy.

Quotes

“In the kitchen we occasionally make stew with dumplings in…but you still can’t beat your own mum’s stew” (Jim)

“(being in the kitchen) brings them out (of themselves) I suppose, perhaps gives them something they didn’t know they had…people I know in there, that I get on with, I respect them because they know what they’re doing and hopefully they respect me as well” (Jim)
I assume
I love homemade soup
I looked forward to it
I can’t really
I’m assuming
I don’t like very spicy food
I never have done
I’ve always
I mean
I will eat a curry
I don’t like it very spicy
I don’t like it
I like my basic food
We would look forward to it
We used to love and enjoy that
I’m just thinking
Why did I rush?
I wanted to
I haven’t thought
I wanted to take
I mean
I like that
I took
I’ve lived on the Hoe all my life
I go into town
I always make sure
I go across the Hoe
I go into town
I think
I have a cup of coffee
I like
I just like
I go up there
I just love the place

I-Poem by Jim
These pilot findings have already provided evidence to inform the design of a larger scale study that will involve and engage other marginalized groups across the city. FLM Phase Two will further develop Participatory Action Research (PAR) to evolve creative methods used to date and explore a wider range of service user engagement with food activities. A complementary focus will be development of an ‘asset based framework’ by which to evaluate best practice of (rehabilitation) food activities in centres across Plymouth. This will include the external food environment, and local food distribution chains, so that consideration can be given to future strategies that embed more upstream measures to tackle the many determinants of food poverty and (in)security.

“Getting involved with food can be a starting point to address other things that are ‘broken’ and lead to progress in other ways” (Ellen, staff member).

Understanding the diversity of this population group, giving them a ‘seat at the table’ and listening to their voices is a crucial aspect to their engagement, leading to optimised community cohesion and social capital. Creative food activities and food-themed events can, therefore, offer meaningful occupation, thus generating a virtuous circle where food promotes engagement and engagement promotes interest in self-care. Food, therefore, becomes an expression of empowerment, with the potential to enhance health, wellbeing and social justice.

If you have any comments or would like to know about this or subsequent projects please contact:
clare.pettinger@plymouth.ac.uk
www.plymouth.ac.uk

Next steps

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