South Australian Food Relief Recipients’ Perspectives on Services

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The South Australian (SA) Department for Communities and Social Inclusion in conjunction with SA Health commissioned research investigating the experience and needs of food relief recipients in SA. Food relief can be regard as a mechanism by which food is provided in times of financial and social hardship. The research objectives were:

(i) To investigate which food relief models are being used by a range of recipients.
(ii) To explore the ways in which families and individuals seek assistance from, and engage with, different food relief services.
(iii) To describe recipients’ perspectives on the appropriateness and effectiveness of food relief services.
(iv) To understand recipients’ perspectives on how to better meet the needs of people who are food insecure.

Method

This study sought to recruit individuals who have received food relief in the last 12 months. Clients of Emergency Relief Services (ERS) in inner and outer metropolitan areas as well as country SA were invited to participate in the study. Seven focus groups were held between October and November 2017, with a total of 54 participants, comprised of 34 males and 20 females.

Results

In the last year recipients had used nine different food service models, often using multiple services at once. Multiple usage was due to the existing criteria restricting the amount of food and number of times each service could be accessed, for example, food pantry use is limited to twice a year. Some recipients had resorted to "dumpster diving", and had been moved on for stealing food.

The reasons for engaging with the services were varied and the extent to which the services were used depended on a number of vulnerabilities identified by recipients including: homelessness, precarious employment, low income due to insufficient welfare payments, poverty, unexpected bills, relationship breakdowns, gambling addiction, and rises in the cost of living. Participants desired a recognition that an inadequate income leads to food insecurity: "no amount of financial counselling will address insufficient income". Focus Group 5.

Entrenched homelessness and ongoing food relief usage was evident. A poignant extract demonstrates this: "She [a participant] tells the group she has been on the streets since she was 11 [years old] and she’s now about 41… She has diabetes and food allergies. After the focus group she says I look familiar to her. We work out that I interviewed her for my PhD on homeless youth and food insecurity in 2000" (Sue Booth, facilitator, field note extract, Focus Group 1).

Stigma, embarrassment and feelings of "being judged" had a real impact of how people engaged with services. Negative comments regarding eligibility assessment were made in most of the focus groups. Some described the services as "harsh" and many said they felt judged. The processes for were seen as repetitive, cumbersome, hard to access and “degrading”, “impacting mental health” and at times resulted in people missing out on food for days at a time: “They make me feel this small. I never went there again.” Male, Focus Group 1. “Don’t make us jump through a million hoops”, Focus Group 5.

Participants were grateful for the services and wanted to give back and reciprocate: “I was one of the people that lined up every week and then I started volunteering and I actually like returned the favour, giving back to the community.” Female, Focus Group 4.
Although grateful for *any* food, the appropriateness of the types and amounts provided, the suitability of the form it was provided in, and the food service environment itself, were questioned. The ability to choose their food, "normal" shopping and eating situations, a relaxing atmosphere, and the opportunity for social interaction were desired by recipients.

The pros and cons for eight food relief service models were discussed. Some services were thought to be more appropriate and effective, particularly those that enabled individual choice, socialisation, promotion of dignity and a pathway out of food insecurity. Providing adequate amounts of nutritious food using models that catered for individual needs was a priority, and models allowing people to reciprocate and/or eat in a "normal" environment were desired.

**Perspectives on how to meet the needs of the food insecure.**

The reason recipients sought food relief was they did not have enough money to buy food, so, a facilitating a pathway out of poverty, to ensure an ongoing adequate income, is a priority. Food relief models that offered a ‘*hand up, not a handout*’ were considered those most likely to assist recipients to move out of food insecurity.

Participants described an ideal food relief model as one that would combine elements of food cooperatives, social supermarkets, and cafes and a blend of additional services including to assist the transition out of food insecurity. The potential for food relief services to contribute to providing pathways out of poverty by linking with services, for example there was a desire for training or development to support work readiness, or to address practicalities such as laundry, showers and toiletries or telephone charging: *"The Bitsa model, with bits a this and bits a that*, a "*one stop shop*", Focus Group 5.

The opportunity for reciprocity, perhaps by volunteering to assist others, was viewed positively by those who had the capacity to do so.

As a priority, food relief services need to provide adequate amounts of nutritious food using food service models that cater for individual needs and encourage socialisation and normalisation. Service operations to reduce stigma and restore and maintain dignity, particularly when assessing need, should be a key focus: "You know, it’s not exactly a proud moment when anyone goes and gets a food hamper... A place like this [offering choice and social support], you know, gives a bit of dignity that you’re able to get back”. Female, Focus Group 3.

**Conclusion**

Based on participants views regarding food relief in South Australia, recipient-oriented services that encourage independence and autonomy as a pathway out of food insecurity are needed. The following vision has been crafted to reflect their over-arching desires:

**The Vision:**

*A client-oriented service delivery encouraging independence and autonomy and a pathway out of food insecurity*

There are eight recommendations for action based on recipients’ focus group feedback.
Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to the South Australian food relief sector:

**Recommendation 1: Acknowledge food insecurity as a product of income inequality and advocate for adequate income for all**

Recognise that food insecurity is symptomatic of income inequality and inadequate income and work to support individuals to obtain an appropriate and ongoing income.

**Recommendation 2: Strengthen existing services to provide higher levels of client-centeredness and responsiveness**

Priority actions to improve food service models include:

1. Increase access on weekends and holiday times
2. Develop realistic assessment of food need to meet nutrition needs
3. Streamline cumbersome assessment appointments and the processes
4. Make financial counselling optional, rather than mandatory
5. Relax “harsh” rules / criteria about occasions of assistance a year
6. Improve food quality and quantity
7. Provide nutritious food that doesn’t exacerbate chronic illnesses
8. Provide food preparation facilities & infrastructure, e.g. Community kitchens, utensils.

**Recommendation 3: Promote the principles of dignity and compassion**

Maximise client experience with regard to the Government of South Australia’s Charter of Affordability, Guiding Principle 4: “We are committed to treating customers in financial stress with respect and compassion.”

**Recommendation 4: Promote the principle of citizen participation by maximising opportunities for choice and reciprocity**

Promote choice, reciprocity and volunteering (where appropriate), which are the embodiment of citizen participation, dignity, personal agency and empowerment.

**Recommendation 5: Embed and promote the social dimensions of food**

Recognise and promote the concept that food is about more than just nutrients and calories to appease hunger - food is associated with cultural and social needs such as conviviality, comfort and connection.

**Recommendation 6: Focus on nutrition**

Develop, promote and embed nutrition-focused food relief policies and practices across the sector. Meet clients’ health needs and expressed desires by increasing the acquisition and provision of a wide variety of safe, nutritious, appropriate, good quality food (particularly fresh food) consistent with dietary recommendations.
**Recommendation 7: Consider blended service models such as ‘the bitsa’**

Test the utility of the concept of a blended service model, providing universal access to nutritious food in response to short and long term food insecurity, and also socialisation and access to opportunities for volunteering where appropriate, participation, and linked services related to pathways out of food insecurity (assistance with employment, skills development, training, work experience and housing).

**Recommendation 8: Develop a Client Service Charter for agencies funded to deliver food relief**

Develop and adopt a Client Service Charter applicable to food relief and related services. Ensure that the charter has a client-oriented focus, based on principles of services being:

1. Awareness that food insecurity is a product of income inequality
2. Client-centred
3. Dignifying, compassionate and respectful
4. Responsive
5. Non-judgement and non-stigmatising
6. Equitable
7. Empowering
8. Committed to choice, inclusion and participation
9. Committed to social connection
10. Nutrition-focused
11. Focussed on pathways to food security.
2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Objectives:
The South Australian Department for Communities and Social Inclusion in conjunction with SA Health commissioned a research project investigating the experience and needs of food relief service recipients in South Australia. This review was undertaken by academic experts in this field (Associate Professor Ian Goodwin-Smith, Dr Sue Booth, Professor John Coveney from Flinders University and Dr Christina Pollard from Curtin University) in September and November, 2017.

Food relief can be regarded as a mechanism by which food is provided in times of financial and social hardship. The research objectives were to:

(i) To investigate which food relief models are being used by a range of recipients.
(ii) To explore the ways in which families and individuals seek assistance from, and engage with, different food relief services.
(iii) To describe recipients’ perspectives on the appropriateness and effectiveness of food relief services.
(iv) To understand recipients’ perspectives on how to better meet the needs of people who are food insecure.

This research contributes valuable data from a recipients’ perspectives to a larger consultation with the food relief sector.

2.2 Background:
Food relief in Australia has existed in various forms since early colonial times and remains the dominant response to food insecurity. Food relief services are diverse and include mobile soup vans, food parcels, vouchers, pantries, seated meal services, food hubs and food banks. Public funding of approximately $64 million supports the provision of food relief for up to 8% of the population. Much of the food provided is donated from food rescue organisations, non-profit groups or food banks and is available free or at minimal cost. Food relief services provide short term, immediate food relief to people experiencing food insecurity. They are not specifically designed to address persistent and regular requests for food, nor do they specifically support the needs of people which chronic conditions such as diabetes, high cholesterol or HIV/AIDS. An Australian study exploring the nutrition capacity in Australia’s food relief sector found an impeded capacity to provide nutritious food for recipients due to limited resource availability.

2.2.1 Food insecurity prevalence
Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food or the ability to acquire that food in socially acceptable ways. Approximately 4% of Australians or about 900,000 households are food insecure. However, this is an underestimate due to the rudimentary measurement instrument used (which captures neither temporality nor severity) as well as infrequent national monitoring. Levels of food insecurity are known to be much higher amongst extremely marginalised groups such as homeless people, Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, especially those in remote areas, refugees and asylum seekers.

In 2015, approximately 4.2% or 75,000 South Australians were considered food insecure and the prevalence was higher among women (4.9%) compared to men (4.1%), unemployed (12.3%) compared to full-time employed (2.2%), and income <$20,000 (12.1%) compared to income >$80,000 (1.2%). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had a greater prevalence of food insecurity (16%) compared to other Australians (4.4%), and people living in public housing (14.5%) had higher rates than home owners (2.2%). Those who were separated (11.2%) or divorced (10.6%) had higher rates than those who are married (2.1%). The 2017 Foodbank Hunger Report stated that 3.6 million Australians (15%) have experienced food insecurity at least once in the last 12 months, with three in five of these individuals experiencing food insecurity at least once a month. By any measure, food insecurity is a significant social issue in Australia.
2.2.2 Recipients of food relief in Australia

Recipients of food relief in Australia have been described as socially isolated, homeless, unemployed, financially struggling and marginalised. However, there is emerging Victorian evidence that food insecurity and a subsequent reliance of food relief has shifted beyond disadvantaged populations into middle-income families. This suggests growing numbers of ‘working poor’ who are struggling with the cost of living.

2.2.3 Expansion of and demand for food relief services

The 2016 Australian Foodbank End Hunger Report states that over 43,000 people seeking food relief each month are unable to be assisted by front line charities and community groups, and a third of these are children. Unsurprisingly, the number of food relief services continues to expand with estimates of approximately 3000-4000 providers of food aid nationally. For example, there has been a dramatic rise and national expansion of food banks in Australia since the first one opened its doors in New South Wales in 1992. Despite the omnipresence of food relief, demand is growing with about 70% of emergency relief agencies reporting increased numbers requiring food assistance in 2016, with an estimated 8% overall increase in 2015. Research indicates that some Melbourne food relief services are finding it increasingly challenging to respond to this increased demand due to a range of factors including the complex needs of clients, intergenerational poverty, and limited education and employment opportunities.

2.2.4 Recipient perspectives of food relief services – International

It is well known from the international literature that people only use food relief services as a last resort, when all other avenues have been exhausted. There is also evidence indicating that using food relief has a psychosocial impact and is associated with a considerable degree of shame, stigma and humiliation and embarrassment. Consequently, the numbers of people using food relief are not a true reflection of the number of people in need of food assistance.

Much of the international evidence has focussed primarily on food assistance in the form of food banks. Data indicates that food bank users are dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of food available. In 1998, Janet Poppendieck’s book, *Sweet charity: emergency food and the end of entitlement* provided a critical analysis of food banks in America. Summarised as the seven deadly “ins”, the critique argued food banks encompassed (i) inaccessibility, (ii) inadequacy, (iii) inappropriateness, (iv) indignity, (v) inefficiency, (vi) insufficiency and (vii) instability. McIntyre et. al (2016) revisited Poppendieck’s seven deadly “ins” using a critical interpretive synthesis and found an additional five “ins” extending beyond food bank operations. These were (viii) ineffectiveness, (ix) inequality, (x) institutionalisation, (xi) invalidation of entitlements and (xii) invisibility.

In 2017, an international scoping review of the experiences and perceptions of food bank users in high-income countries including Canada, UK, USA, New Zealand and the Netherlands and was published. The review found that although participants value the food services provided by food banks, the experience could be largely negative. Participants spoke positively of volunteers and were thankful for the services, but they also consistently reported limited food choice, poor quality, shame, stigma and embarrassment associated with food bank use.

2.2.5 Recipient perspectives of food relief services - Australian literature

There is little empirical research in Australia on the perspectives of food relief service users. An Adelaide study of 150 homeless young people, 63% of whom were relying on food relief services, found their diets had limited variety, lacked fruit and vegetables, and had fewer bread and cereals servings than the diets of domiciled young people. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and types of food offered.

A South Australian qualitative study into how users of the community food bank model (food hubs) perceive the experience was conducted in 2015. The results indicate that food hubs were used only as a last resort and people were extremely grateful for the service even if their food choices were limited. Feelings of shame associated with food hub use amongst participants were prevalent and, in some instances, this was exacerbated by the attitudes of volunteers/staff, or when confronted with poor quality.
food. The rules and processes within the food bank environment were confusing, with some items being free, others priced and others sold by weight. Limits on certain food items were sometimes imposed and this was monitored by staff, which sometimes led to confrontational situations\textsuperscript{31}.

The perspectives of charitable food service recipients on the appropriateness and effectiveness of services was explored in Perth in 2015\textsuperscript{33}. In-depth interview data found that most recipients reported obtaining sufficient food, but the quality and type of food did not meet their expectations or needs. Three main themes were identified:

(i) Issues with the charitable food system,
(ii) Specific issues with the food per se, and
(iii) Recipient suggestions for service improvement.

The study drew attention to the limitations of charitable food services in inner city Perth for recipients, and offers ways forward grounded in the experience of users.

Given the paucity of Australian research in this area, the current study will provide insight into the lived experience of food relief service recipients in South Australia by capturing their voices and opinions.
3. METHOD

3.1 Participants and recruitment

Managers of Emergency Relief Services (ERS) in inner, outer metropolitan areas as well as country SA were identified with the assistance of the Department of Communities and Social Inclusion (DCSI). An email was sent explaining the study and inviting each service to participate. Services that agreed to take part in the study were followed up and convenient date and time was made for the researchers to attend.

This study sought to recruit individuals who have received food relief in the last 12 months. Seven focus groups were held in October/November 2017, with a total of 54 participants. Table 1 provides details of the focus group sites and agencies. As emergency relief services’ busiest times are concentrated during a small window of time each day, researchers sought the permission and co-operation of service managers to be present and recruit during busy times with high client numbers. On those days, researchers, with appropriate assistance of service staff and volunteers, would approach emergency service participants and invite them to participate. A standard verbal script was used and the designated time and location of the focus group was advised. Focus group participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form. The study was also verbally explained to them and consenting participants signed the consent form before proceeding.

Focus group participants were given AUD$30 supermarket gift card in appreciation for their contribution. Services were located in urban and rural areas and covered a variety of service models (see Table 1).

Table 1: Location of focus group services, brief description, date and number of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Service description</th>
<th>Number of focus group participants and gender split</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Inner city</td>
<td>Seated breakfast program and emergency food relief appointments (Voucher)</td>
<td>10 (7 men, 3 women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Inner city</td>
<td>Emergency food relief appointments (Food pantry access) and free bread service</td>
<td>7 (6 men, 1 woman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Emergency food relief appointments (Food hub)</td>
<td>7 (5 men, 2 women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Emergency food relief appointments (Food parcels)</td>
<td>4 (2 men, 2 women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Outer metropolitan</td>
<td>Volunteer run food hub – free food plus access to some items at reduced prices</td>
<td>9 (2 men, 7 women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Outer metropolitan</td>
<td>Emergency food relief appointments (Food pantry access)</td>
<td>7 (5 men, 2 women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Outer metropolitan</td>
<td>Food pantry, free bread, fruit and vegetables</td>
<td>10 (3 men and 7 women)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Design and procedure

3.2.1 Selection of visual stimuli

To address the first and second research objectives, a description and image representing five service types was provided and a ranking exercise was used. Sets of pictorial flash cards with simple descriptions of service types on the back were used during the focus groups (Figure 1). The services were described were those acute emergency food relief options that are commonly available in South Australia. These correspond to flash cards (i) Food parcels, (ii) Food pantries, (iii) Gift cards/vouchers (iv) Seated meal services and (v) Foodbank Food hubs). Next, three further cards were used, representing services that are available in some other sites or in other states or overseas. These correspond to flash cards (A) Subsidised café meal program, (B) Food Co-operatives and (C) Social
Supermarkets. Cards A, B and C were used to prompt responses in regards to research objectives three and four.

The flash cards served as a visual stimulus to keep the discussion on track, and the group was asked to place the cards in rank order, starting with the one they would be least likely to use. Group consensus was sought on the placement of cards. See Appendix 7.1 for a copy of the cards.

Figure 1: Visual flash cards used in focus group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The visual flash cards</th>
<th>Visual flash cards in ranked order of preference during a focus group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Visual flash cards" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Ranked cards" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.2 Development of focus group guide
A semi-structured guide directed focus group discussions whilst allowing for diversions reflective of participants’ statements (Appendix 7.2). The structure of the focus group guide reflected the key research objectives for the project. Group participants were asked what type of services they had used in the last year, the appropriateness and effectiveness of using these services, which of these services they would be most/least likely to use (ranking exercise), and to explore other models of emergency food relief, the pros / cons of using these services, and which of these services they would be most/least likely to use (ranking exercise). Finally, the group was asked to describe their ideal service for food relief provision.

3.3 Ethics
The Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee approved the research Project No. 7770.
4. RESULTS
A total of 54 people participated in seven focus groups held across metropolitan and regional South Australia. Of these, 34 were men and 20 were women. The following section outlines the results of the data analysis presented against each of the research objectives.

4.1 Types of food relief services being used by respondents
Respondents described a range of ways they had obtained food in the last year.

4.1.1 Short term, emergency supplies
Food parcels
Food parcels, where a mixture of food items and products are bundled together, some requiring minimum preparation and cooking.

“It's just in an emergency you go and get that and you survive on it for two or three days.” Male, Focus Group 1

Okay, so you get a voucher and a parcel? (focus group facilitator)

Yeah, which is very handy, you know. Gets me over the line, you know. Male, Focus Group 1

“Through the Magdalene Centre. Like you only get two visits a year so it’s going through Anglicare.” Female, Focus Group 1

“When you get a food parcel or something you don’t always get exactly what you’re – they’ll give you rice and they'll give you this and that but they won’t give you like mince to go with the – like to go with pasta and stuff like that. They give you this and that but it’s nothing to really make up a meal.” Male, Focus Group 3

There were comments that the food parcels were tied to the work church missions or food banks and about quality of the food, especially in relation to ‘use-by dates’

Gift vouchers or cards, for supermarkets
Supermarket vouchers or cards, where food (and possibility a limited range of other goods) can be bought. Vouchers are limited, issued by agencies after assessing need and are usually AUD$20, which was not viewed as realistic, particularly for a major supermarket chain.

“I'm using [X service]. Say like if I need like assistance and I'm low on food and that I'll try and get into one of them appointments and get a voucher and assistance with food.” Male, Focus Group 1

“While I was in Queensland, two places give you more. They don't give you $20; they give you $50 food cards up there and Brisbane and Sydney have probably got the best services in Australia.” Male, Focus Group 1

Respondents said vouchers allowed choice and sometimes enabled them to buy non-food items.

So is that idea – you know how – of being able to do your own choosing [with vouchers], is that important to you?

“Well, since you mentioned that, yeah, because when I go shopping I usually always like to go – because if you get someone else to go shopping for you they usually pick out the expensive brand and that but if you’re – I'm not saying but if you're a bit like me, most people prefer to pick out the cheapest brands you can get and whatever's in it, it's still the same. Like me and my brother always said, it's not actually the product that's in it, it's the named brand you pay for.” Male, Focus Group 4
Food pantry
Food pantry, where recipients can, free of charge, and usually after being assessed as meeting eligibility criteria, help themselves to a range of food items at a designated point. Sometimes the range of foods available for recipients is quite limited.

“You can pick up five items.”
Focus Group 1

Other respondents valued the Food Pantry because, while deemed to be emergency food supply, choice was possible, unlike the Food Parcels. Figure 2 shows a typical food relief pantry.

Figure 2: A typical food Pantry

Mobile ‘soup vans’ or direct from food rescue
Mobile ‘soup vans’ at breakfast time or direct from food rescue were used by some recipients.

“A food van. Its [X service] does Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights. Friday nights is done by another church mob and then Saturday nights is done by [Y] and [Z] and I normally just go there for my feeds at night.” Male, Focus Group 1

“Oz Harvest, yeah, they give out the milk and things like that iced coffee.” Female, Focus Group 1

Sourcing food from a street ‘van’ was also mentioned in country focus groups.

Food events and market days
A number of respondents talked about various food events they visited, such as sausage sizzles, monthly market days, and occasional food give-aways.

“Every month at [X service] - it’s called a market thing - so everyone comes in, they just set all the tables out like a U-shape, put everything down and everyone just walks around and picks what you want.” Male, Focus Group 1

What are your thoughts on the Salvos monthly market?

“Yeah, it’s really good but you see people go in and take and then I’ve heard that people say ‘oh they cleared it out and they’ll be down at’ – it’s like a trash and treasure market and they’ll be down the fresh food selling it themselves”. Female, Focus Group 2
However, some respondents comment on the abuse at these events especially free food markets, where food was taken and sometimes sold elsewhere. This was because it was hard to check who might not be eligible for food support.

“Just around there. So like anyone, you know, a businessman who decides he wants to not pay for breakfast can go in there and eat breakfast every day So I think there needs to be perhaps increased screening”. Female, Focus Group 2

In summary, emergency food supplies in acute food shortage were well known to the respondents. This was probably truer of the metropolitan experience rather than those in the country. For example, in there did not appear to be the equivalent of a ‘Van’ selling cheaply or giving away food in the country. Nor did there appear to be the equivalent of the monthly free food event that the metropolitan respondents spoke of. The notion of choice and the ability to select food according to health needs, dietary requirements and preferences arose in a number of groups. The benefits of a voucher or gift card over food parcels, because of the ability to use as wished, was mentioned by many.

4.1.2 Longer term solutions to food insecurity
Longer term solutions to food insecurity are provided by:

**Food Hubs**
Food hubs, where for a membership fee respondents can buy heavily price reduced foods that are close to or just past their sell-buy date.

“[X service] have got – you can go there and you can get a food pack as well, say about two or three shopping bags full. Cereal and readymade meals and…”

**So they’ve got the [food pack], they’ve got the sit down…**

“Yeah they also do the Sunday sit down. There’s a Friday soup kitchen up in one of the churches.” Male, Focus Group 3

**Sit down meal services**
Sit down meal services, where recipients are able to eat, free of charge, a meal in the company of others at five named services.

Sit down meals where favoured by many respondents, mostly in the metropolitan focus groups, for a number of reasons. They were regular sources of meals on specific days and evenings, thus reliable and well patronised. They were also praised for providing a social setting to eat and enjoy food.

“With [X service] they’ll serve you a meal and they’ll sit down beside you and eat the meal with you and talk to you whereas a lot of the Salvos workers, they’ll hand the meals out and they won’t even sit down and talk to you. … I’d rather the person that’s handing the meal out, when you’ve finished handing the meals out sit down and talk to us, spend time with us. Don’t just hand the meal out and go ‘zoom’ and take off and go somewhere else”. Male, Focus Group 1

**So it’s that social stuff that you’re missing?**

“The social. [X service] I’d rather go to because they sit down and talk and laugh and have fun and everything like that and Salvos…” Male, Focus Group 1

**Food Co-operatives**
Food Co-operatives, where reduced price food can be bought including meal ingredients with recipes to prepare at home.
“It’s called ‘the co-op’ and you go in and you buy meals that are prepacked; they’re not cooked but they’re prepacked. You get everything you need to cook that meal and the recipe and it’s like $6 and it will feed four, five adults.”

“It’s just you paid two [memberships] – well, what we did for this one, was we paid $2. You get a little card. For every dollar you spend it gets accumulated up and at a Christmas time that amount would come off a Christmas hamper that they’d do, which I thought was absolutely fantastic. Go in there if you’ve made anything. If you’ve grown veggies or fruit you could take it in there and they give back to you. Like you give them that, you can get a couple of meals. You can get – they had like butter and milk, baby’s…”. Female, Focus Group 4

“Well, that seated servicing, you don’t have to show anything there, you just rock up and – well, it depends on where you go really. I’ve been to a couple where you just go and they give you food, they chat to you and then you ‘bye’. They don’t ask you anything about yourself other than to have a chat and they’re quite friendly. The ones that I’ve gone to have been quite friendly.” Female, Focus Group 5

Other one off quotes suggested that some respondents found food in a number of other places, for example vegetable gardens “So the community gardens up there at Veale Gardens, there’s like fresh herbs and stuff for like baked potato, or whatever.” Female, Focus Group 2. Fishing was also seen as a viable avenue for regular food “I use the ocean. I go fishing. If you know where the fish are you never starve really” Male, Focus Group 4

4.1.3 Socially unacceptable food sources

Rubbish bin or ‘dumpster diving’

Rubbish bin or ‘dumpster diving’, where by expired and unsalable food thrown away by supermarkets and restaurants is retrieved from bins. This is considered ‘stealing’ in Australia and people are often moved on by the police.

“…I did a dumpster dive behind Woolworths at [X suburb] and like literally in the bin there, there was chicken still like sealed in the packaging and I probably pulled out probably nearly about $80 worth of food straight from the bin that were all still sealed. I’m thinking what – and then the cops come and tried to take the food from me and I said ‘get stuffed, I’m taking it because I’m eating’ because like I hadn’t eaten for nearly two days.” Female, Focus Group 1

“But I see it everywhere, even on [X Terrace]. People going through the bins. You see it everywhere”. Male, Focus Group 1

4.1.4 Multiple food service usage

Multiple services were used by many of the respondents, particularly in response to agency criteria limiting the use of services. For example, people were only eligible to use the food pantry two times a year and had to seek alternative assistance at other times. To obtain enough food, people sought their food from various services, for example, breakfast at a soup van, markets on the days they were open.

“Normally just go there for my feeds at night. Come for breakfast in the morning during weekdays. Sometimes I don’t eat lunch and I just go without then, just wait until tea and have tea, go back to my camp here [in the parklands] and sleep and do the same again the next day.” Focus Group 1
4.2 Reasons for seeking assistance and ways respondents engage with services.

The reasons for engaging with the services were varied and the extent to which the food relief services were used depended on a number of vulnerabilities identified by participants including: homelessness, precarious employment, low income due to insufficient welfare payments, poverty, unexpected bills, relationship breakdowns, gambling addiction and rises in the cost of living. There were nuances described in the specific needs for families and single people during the focus groups.

4.2.1 Reasons for seeking help from food relief services

Homelessness

“I’m already carrying my life on my back and sometimes you’re just struggling with that burden. Then all them extra cans [of food, such as baked beans] and shit, you want to just dismiss it because you don’t want to carry no more shit, you know, so that’s where a lot of the [other options on the cards] are more convenient and then you can just get the stuff you need along the travels and that.” Male, Focus Group 1

Homeless respondents with no means of cooking or food preparation were unlikely or unable to use food parcels, food pantry or other sources where some preparation is required or because they have nowhere to store or carry food.

“Yeah, I think they’re good [parcels] but when you’re living on the streets you’ve got nowhere to cook some of the food and it makes it hard.” Male, Focus Group 1.

“Other food services, they just bundle it all in a bag and say ‘there you go’. You go through it all, half of it I can eat but the other half I think, how am I going to cook it? I don’t have a pot or a frypan. When I ask for stuff here it’s ‘look, I need food that I don’t need to cook with because I live on the streets, I don’t have a pot, pan, knife, fork, spoon, plate or anything so give me something that I can just open the can up and start eating it.” Male, Focus Group 1

For this group, [Xs] van and sit down meal services were seen to be more appropriate. The sit down meals were considered by respondents in a number of focus groups as not only a convenient source of food but also a place where social interaction can occur, which was considered important.

“I use here but I come here for breakfast and showers, catch up with friends and then after one o’clock, two o’clock I leave and go find a power point, charge my phone and go back to my tent.” Male, Focus Group 1

There was evidence of entrenched use of food relief. The field note extract from Focus Group 1 below describe a woman who has been homeless for 31 years.

“A woman on the far side of the table from me is of medium-thick build with shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair. She has broad facial features and makes intermittent eye contact.

She tells the group she has been on the streets since she was 11 and she’s now about 41. She looks much older. She has diabetes and food allergies.

After the focus group she says I look familiar to her. We work out that I interviewed her for my PhD on homeless youth and food insecurity in 2000. She is terribly excited by this and tells everyone in the vicinity. To my surprise, she gives me a bear hug and tells some the people who are milling around. When we are leaving the service via the laneway --she is there again…sitting on the pavement. She shouts she can’t believe it and tells the people she is sitting with the story.”

Field note extract, Sue Booth Focus Group 1
Inadequate income – Pensions

The trigger for engagement with service for many participants was income related. At different times participants reported utilising specific services offering free food as they did not have the ability to pay for food, even at a discounted price. For some, the inability to pay money appeared to be related to the type of welfare pension they were eligible for. For example, the full pension was described as better than the dole or Newstart.

“I used the system before I got on the full pension and the full pension tends to be a bit better than the single dole. You run out of money pretty easy on the single dole. Yeah, the full pension’s a lot better like for managing your food.” Male, Focus Group 1

“Yeah, that’s probably a way to go, I reckon, then people would just go in there – on social security, go in there and access food for free, you know,” Male, Focus Group 2

The inadequacy of the Newstart pension was discussed by participants in a couple of the groups. The increases in the Newstart amount has been negligible compared to other pensions, so the perception is that it has not increased at all.

“Not that the pension is – you know, you get that much on the pension anyway. As a Newstart recipient there hasn’t been an increase since 1994, and yet the pension’s gone up, everyone else’s has.” Male, Focus Group 2

“It’s not much of a new start is it?” Female, Focus Group 2

What appeared to be missing from most of the focus group discussions was the progression from needing food relief to becoming self-sufficient around food acquisition or food secure. Many participants described recurrent or intermittent use of service.

“You take in payments, bank details, all that stuff, address, and then they’ll sit down and try and work out how for you to spend your money. Sometimes it still doesn’t work.” Male, Focus Group 1

Unemployment and the increasing cost of accommodation and utilities

Although there was little direct discussion about unemployment some participants spoke of the need for assistance with their resume, clothes, showers and sanitary items. Utility price increases, including high electricity bills related to cooling or heating, were leaving some respondents short of disposable income to spend on food.

“You know, electricity at the moment is really, really high so people are getting bills like $1200 or $1300 for the quarter. If they’re not on a payment plan or something with their company they may get hit with that bill and not know where they’re going to pull that funding” Female, Focus Group 5.

“Well I got that. I had a unit where I was paying rent, electricity bills. In the end it got too much and I said ‘I can’t do this no more’ and I went on the streets because I had no money. $500 a fortnight to pay rent and then you had to pay for electricity, pay for gas, pay for a phone. I thought well, I’ve got $100 left over to buy food. You still can’t buy clothes, you can’t buy footwear, you can’t buy nothing.” Male, Focus Group 1

4.2.2 Ways recipients engage with services

Vouchers for non-food items

There was some discussion about the need for and lack of access to non-food items. The convenience of vouchers or gift cards was often mentioned, particularly as it was convenient especially allowed the possibility of buying non-food, yet essential for living, items such as toiletries. Dog food was also mentioned by respondents in a number of the groups.

“Yes. Like, don’t get me wrong, all these sort of things are fantastic but they never give you nappies, sanitary items.” Female, Focus Group 4
Paying for recycled food and membership fees
The idea of paying a small membership fee or paying for heavily reduced food items, 80% reduction in some cases, was mostly supported. Participants saw the value for money that these arrangements can provide. However, for some, paying anything for food that was not saleable or was "rejected", "recycled" or "out of date" was inappropriate.

There was an observation by some respondents in some of the groups that free food services were sometimes abused. For example, mention was made of the free food such as chocolates being taken and on-sold elsewhere.

A desire for reciprocity
Giving back or reciprocating a gift of food by volunteering or bringing in fresh produce was mentioned by participants in a number of groups.

"I was one of the people that lined up every week and then I started volunteering and I actually like returned the favour, giving back to the community." Female, Focus Group 4

"It’s not an ‘us and them’ mentality – everyone chips in." Female, Focus Group 5

One women (an Arabic speaker) volunteers to help people who come to the service and need to connect with an Arabic speaking volunteer.

“Well, with me as well it’s a bit different to everyone probably. I wanted to do something as well. I had a bit of time. I like to give a bit of my time and I heard that they need some people for translation for the refugees so I came in and I’m helping out with some of the Arabic speaking language so…

And you speak Arabic?

“Yeah, so I speak both languages, English and Arabic, and now I’m helping out on Saturday and Tuesdays, Tuesdays in the kitchen, and it’s also as well helped me because I’m in the building industry and I was in a circumstance where I didn’t have money so a lot of the food here helped as well." Female, Focus Group 7

One service’s volunteers reported that the number of food relief recipients offering to volunteer was more than needed:

“We have on average maybe seven requests to volunteer every week. Well we don’t – I mean we’re not ungrateful but we don’t need them. Have a look at the team that I have. If any of them was to leave then obviously I would take someone on but we… I can’t have too many people and then I can’t have too less people….” Female, Focus Group 5

A number of participants described how they made a contribution in exchange for food:

“I went into the toilets down at [X Terrance] and I cleaned up all the toilets, like everything was just like - looked like crap in there and like I needed to go but after I finished doing what I had to do, I cleaned up all the rubbish in there, they knew I hadn’t eaten so they got me some chicken nuggets and a diet Coke for nothing, for just cleaning up the toilets for them.” Female, Focus Group 1

“A lot of the streeties in Perth do it. They’ll go to McDonald’s or Hungry Jack’s just up on the Mall and ask ‘you got a free meal?’ ‘Oh no, we’ve got no free meals’ I said ‘I’ll start working. I’ll kick the cleaners out and I’ll wipe all the tables off and I’ll sweep. Within 2-3 hours they’re sitting out the front and they’re going ‘three hamburgers and a drink of Coke.’ because you’ve gone and you’ve worked and the manager sees it inside and says ‘Oh these people are on the streets and they’re in here working. Give them a meal’. Male, Focus Group 1

When discussing volunteering as an option for membership to services participants noted that this would not work for everyone as some people are carers for children or elderly or have some disability
and they do not have the time or capacity to volunteer. Importantly, it was noted that some people requiring food relief were working and this would not allow them to volunteer.

Socialisation, community, family and belonging
All groups mentioned that the services provided more than just food, they provided social contact or a sense of community and belonging:

“Yeah and it’s also a social interaction too…” Male, Focus Group 2

“We get a lot of people that don’t come here for the food; they come here because they know they can have a chat. Sometimes we’re the only people in the whole entire week that they’ve spoken to so it gets them out of their house and it gets them talking. It’s the social.” Female, Focus Group 5

Once food service was described as being like a family, when asked about how to improve food relief services the following discussion took place

You’d like to see this [X service] cloned?

“People are really friendly here too.” Male, Focus Group 7

“They’re like family.” Female, Focus Group 7

“Yeah.” Female, Focus Group 7

To access other services
Multiple service types and add-on services were described, for example, laundry, phone charging, nappies, toiletries, employment, white goods, furniture, financial assistance, financial management, resume services etc.

“Something like that [resume assistance] would be really good because when they – you know, you go to Centrelink and they go ‘oh, it’s nice if you start looking for work’ – like before I had the babies – and it’s like well, how do you put a resume together? Do you know what I’m saying?” Female, Focus Group 4

“Well, the [X service] will review – they do an assessment on what your situation is. If you’ve just been made redundant and you’re really struggling they will help you out with food vouchers. They’ll help you out with food cards for other things that are not food, like toiletries and stuff, and they’ll try and direct you into seeing a financial counsellor so that you can get some budgeting skills on stuff.” Female, Focus Group 7

“Depending on a situation we [Y service] may help somebody with a voucher for a chemist but it’s a particular chemist and we help them that way.” Female, Focus Group 7

A sense of ‘hope’—moving through to the other side of the table
The only discussions about ‘moving out of food poverty’ were in focus group five which comprised of volunteers, some of whom had previously been recipients and some were volunteers as well as recipients. The success story was about two recipients who met, became friends, married and pooled financial resources. Although, they still appeared to still need to use the service sometimes.

“I think it’s also they see that these guys used to be in the line so they think that there’s hope for them, so it’s not – it may be dark right now and they may be struggling right now but just like the people that are on the other side of the table ‘they got through it and I can get through it too. It gives them that sense of hope.” Female, Group 5, now a volunteer.
So they’re [social supermarkets] about what you might call capacity building as well, sort of...

“Disabilities SA have something similar here too. They have – because I did a – I wanted a course done and they helped me and I got my certificate through them.” Female, Focus Group 7

4.3 Perspectives on appropriateness and effectiveness of food relief services.

Respondents described the stigma of using these types of food service and the impact of the processes to assess eligibility for food. Although grateful for any food, they questioned the appropriateness of food, in terms of the types and amounts available and the suitability of the form it was provided in and the food service environment itself (choice, atmosphere, and social interaction opportunity). This section outlines the problems identified, what is currently working well in some services, and their recommendations for improvements. Finally there is a ranking of preference for services by the respondents and commentary about the suitability of these in meeting specific needs.

4.3.1 Problems with service procedures

Organisations are hard – eligibility requirements, demeaning processes and exclusions

Negative comments regarding the eligibility criteria for food relief were made in most of the focus groups.

“They make me feel this small. I never went there again.” Male, Focus Group 1

“All the years that I’ve been going through these organisations they do get a little bit hard where, like I was saying, in something like this [resume assistance], which they haven’t got for, you know, people like myself. Well, basically it’s not only the appointments, it’s the explanations and sometimes you feel like that your words aren’t strong enough or, you know, your needs aren’t strong enough to – you know what I mean, like the thing with these places, you know.” Female, Focus Group 4

“Yeah, if you have more than two visits you’ve got to take all these documents and you asked all the questions ‘what do you do with the money, with the pension?’ They say ‘I get the same. How come I can do it and you can’t do it?’” Male, Focus Group 1

The notion of being referred by an agency to a particular service was seen as degrading and embarrassing.

“See, the problem with most of those is that, like you said, you have to go to an agency where they make you feel so degraded. They’re like ‘how much do you earn? What do you do with that money? Why don’t you have any money to buy food?’ and it’s embarrassing whereas here you don’t have to explain yourself and the food co-op you don’t have to explain yourself, you go in, buy what you want or get what you want and you walk out the door. They’re not looking at you like ‘oh my God what. Female, Focus Group 2

The stigma and embarrassment has a real impact of how people engage with services, for example, one young man in Focus Group 6 described weighing up the pros and costs of being embarrassed for 15 minutes in order to access a supermarket voucher.

“Even when you walk out, you duck in here and you’re sort of looking out there to see if anybody’s watching, you know, so it’s a bit embarrassing at times.” Male, Focus Group 2

There was a disconnect between need and the services available and recipients responses to the eligibility and criteria demonstrates this:

“These places are also - you can only really use them, say, every eight weeks. Well, if you’ve got a $1200 electric bill and you’re trying to pay as much off that plus school fees, plus this, you know, you’ve got animals, you’ve got – sometimes we’re okay for months on end and then all of a sudden
air-conditioner time, we’ve got the air-conditioner on because it’s hot, you know.” Female, Focus Group 2

There were several issues with the services that contribute to frustration, despair and inaccessibility of food, these include:

Telephone lines, to agencies are constantly engaged. One woman in Focus Group 6 showed the facilitator 39 calls logged on their telephone the morning of the interview as she was seeking an appointment to be assessed for food assistance.

Staff shortages, a manager of a service [focus group 6] reported that there are insufficient staff and counsellors to meet demand; they offer about 15-20 appointments a day already.

Timing of food availability, the need for food is immediate and the eligibility assessment process means that people can sometimes wait up to three days for an appointment.

Funding constraints, service funding has reduced so they have had to ‘make do’ and are struggling to meet demand:

“See, our big pantry that used to have staple stuff, like flour and tea, coffee, all of that, we used to get money, a subsidy from the government to do that. Well, that stopped last year, in June or something, and so a lot of that now, it’s not as abundant as what it used to be but we rely now on donations and instead of getting a small jar or a small tin of coffee in a thing you now get a small bag because we don’t have the funding.”

“And there’s so many people that need help.” Female, Focus Group 7

Psychosocial / mental health impact of food relief assistance

Participants described the mental health impact of the stigma attached to asking for or needing food relief.

“I tend to think that’s the unfortunate problem that we have now, is people who are in dire need tend not to use a facility for that – you know, for that reason, they feel ashamed and if they do use the service then it’s detrimental to their wellbeing.” Male, Focus Group 2

“You just feel like a loser when – yeah, you’re getting food but, you know, people feel like a loser.” Male, Focus Group 2

“But, you know, for people – certain people are affected with their mental health but on the other side of the coin, some people go the other way and become radicalised from that experience so, you know, they end up – tend to become negative towards society.” Male, Focus Group 2

Two different women in one focus group spoke of removing their jewellery, which was given to them by their mothers, before going to the food service or financial counsellor because they felt judged.

“They do judge you, they judge.” Female, Focus Group 7

“You sense it [judgement] straight away” Female, Focus Group 7

Unfamiliar with how services work

There was ignorance regarding what services were available, how they worked and what participants had to do to use them. Participants said they were not invited or approached to be shown how services worked.

“I don’t use the services provided out the back here [Magdalen Centre food pantry at the rear of the building] so I don’t know how – I don’t even know how that works for a start because I’ve never
enquired. No-one’s ever approached me and sort of asked me if I would like to use the services out the back so…” Female, Focus Group 2

“Could use the help but, as I said, I don’t know how the services work and I’ve never enquired and no-one’s ever approached me so I just sort of…” Male, Focus Group 2

Services not available at weekends or holidays
Mention was made by a number of respondents that services were very much geared to Monday to Friday availability only. Especially for those in experiencing acute food shortages and needing emergency help, this made life difficult.

“What about weekends and public holidays?”

“Nothing.”

“Church.”

“Weekends are done by [W service], [X Street] or Saturday morning’s barbecue. Saturday nights is [X], [Y], [Z] service. Sunday is the one here, Sunday lunchtime and then [P] service does [Y] Place Sunday night. Public holidays there’s only the food van at night time, nothing else.” Male, Focus Group 1

“Yeah I think just even general – like in general, not just food or whatever, for the homeless, for the whatever, the shutting down on the weekend, you know, people have crises on weekends, people have crises – you know, it’s a real business structure and doesn’t conform to business hours.” Female, Focus Group 2

Unintended consequence of relying on volunteers
All services rely on volunteers to assist with food provision. There was mention of volunteers having ‘favourites’ suggesting both positive consequences for the favoured recipient of food, and possibly negative consequences for those missing out. Two people described negative perceptions of choice architecture by services and volunteers relating to preference being given to ‘favourites’ who the volunteers had come to know and like, and the suitability of food required for special dietary needs.

“But sometimes in places, like literally for me, like they’ll specifically cater for the people they really, really like but if you’re not liked by people who are working there they - it’s like ‘stiff shit’. They give you whatever they want to give you.” Female, Focus Group 1

“Yeah, I know.” Male, Focus Group 1

“And I end up in hospital most of the time because of those people.” Female, Focus Group 1

“I used to have to volunteer in the café.” Female, Focus Group 5

Supermarket AUD$20 gift card
The value ascribed to supermarket vouchers is inadequate to purchase a suitable range of foods to feed either an individual for several days, or a family to supplement their food. Although grateful for the supermarket card or voucher, the amount of money, AUD$20, was considered inadequate, possibly acceptable for a single person, but not for a family.

“I mean that’s [the card] okay for a single person. I don’t know what- how much you’re allocated with the card here.” Male, Focus Group 2

“They [cards] are very useful but realistically what can you get out of them, $20? I have a family of eight.” Female, Focus Group 4
There was almost a hierarchy of value placed on vouchers and cards. Supermarket gift cards were considered valuable because participants were able to choose what they wanted to buy. They could also buy items they wanted or needed, for example toiletries, dog food, as well as food. Their “value for money” was questioned by some participants as supermarkets were considered to charge premium prices.

“You’re limited to what they give you [food parcels]; that’s what I want to say. If you’ve got the card you’re more free to go to Coles or…” Male, Focus Group 2

“…Woollies and you pick up – you feel free yourself to pick up what you want.” Male, Focus Group 2

One woman said she felt guilty receiving a card, suggesting their higher value than food parcels. Cards also help avoid the stigma associated with walking into food relief services.

“There’s some – like if I was to ask – if I was to say ‘look, I’ve got food issues and the food parcel that you’ve just given me, I really can’t eat anything out of that’ I would feel really – I feel guilty getting a card.” Female, Food Group 2

“Well, the card system is okay because there’s no sort of stigma, isn’t it? Some people feel sort of embarrassed or ashamed in entering places like these and if you go in a place like this and you know, if a card is given to you, I mean you’re free to go and buy without no sort of stigma attached because nobody knows. You find a lot of people sort of ‘oh,’ sort of ashamed to…” Male, Food Group 2

Saving by adding value to cards, Christmas credit scheme

One participant described a card membership number, points system, and accumulating additional credit to cards that some services use. Christmas hamper credit systems were described by participants in a couple of the groups.

“They’ve been around for a very long time– I don’t go there much now because I’m slowly getting myself together and that but when I had children– they’re adults now–my membership number was 47 at the [X service]. Now they’re up to the thousands and they’ve just changed the system. I went in there – you know, I’d never bring my card, I’d just go I’m number 47 and they would type it all in. I went in there one day and they’re like ‘you know you’re up to $50, right?’ I’m like ‘what?’ and that was over years.” Female, Focus Group 5

“I know they have a Christmas club. You go in each week and deposit $2 and then you get like a $100 hamper or – yeah, there’s two different hampers you can get and they show you – so it’s enough for a Christmas meal with all the extras and the trimmings and the lollies. You get mince pies…” Female, Focus Group 5

4.3.2 The problems with food

Lack of a client-centeredness of food

Across the focus groups was a belief that respondents felt they were denied the opportunity to practice ‘food citizenship’. That is to say, they were not expected to exercise forms of discrimination or choice about which foods they preferred or disliked. This was especially true for food from food parcels and food pantries. Sometimes food given to respondents was incompatible with their health needs. They also described a lack of responsiveness to their specific individual needs.

“Yeah, with my allergies I just wish places – like there’s more – like literally they ask you what you can eat before they go and like serve you instead of putting everything in front of you and expecting you'll be able to eat everything because for me.., like if I was eating here today I don’t know what they’re having here today but I - when - I have to have money to have the meal here and at the moment I don’t get my pay until Thursday and like I think to myself, like it means I have to have pastry and with pastry I’ve got to be – like by the end of the day my sugar levels are too high just
because of eating the pastry and if I [have to go to sleep] I have to go to sleep with a migraine and that doesn't happen." Female, Focus Group 1

"I just – but sometimes when you get food that you can't eat in a parcel, because I'm allergic to a lot of things and so literally so if I can't swap with them people there I go and swap with others if anyone else is there at the time." Female, Focus Group 1

"Like I say, most people, if you can't eat Weetbix or anything – I'm not saying it ever happens because I've never heard of it but let's say for example you're allergic to it and that and you can't eat Weetbix or anything". Male, Focus Group 4

One participant gave an example of how she approached two services with a single food request and they were unable to accommodate her:

"I went to one of these other places once because I had absolutely no money and my kids wanted – I think it was a peanut butter sandwich so I just kind of went in there and pretty much 'I just want peanut butter' and they're like 'we can't help you'. They sent me all the way to [X suburb] to another place and I just walked in and she's like 'do you have an appointment?' I'm like 'no, I don't get paid until tomorrow. My kids want a peanut butter sandwich. I just need peanut butter'. Female, Focus Group 2

Strong appreciation of social and cultural dimensions of food

Another strong sentiment across some of the focus groups was the appreciation that food was not without its social and cultural dimensions. For example, eating and meeting in the company of others was highlighted:

"Yep. I use here but I come here for breakfast and showers, catch up with friends and then after one o'clock, two o'clock I leave and go find a power point, charge my phone and go back to my tent". Male, Focus Group 1

"Not a margin of society. You know, it's not exactly a proud moment when anyone goes and gets a food hamper, or what not. A place like this, you know, gives a bit of dignity that you're able to get back". Female, Focus Group 3

"I'd rather the person that's handing the meal out, when you've finished handing the meals out sit down and talk to us, spend time with us. Don't just hand the meal out and go 'zoom' and take off and go somewhere else." Male, Focus Group 1

Quality of food

Comment was made about food being offered which is close to or beyond the date by which it should be used. Some respondents talked about agencies that require payment for food which has almost reached its use-by date, and exception was taken against this.

"Yeah. I mean if it’s expired they should give it for free to everybody. I don't belong there and the first time I went there 'oh, you can spend up to $25' so I put stuff in the trolley, $30, and when I went home, how stupid I am. I spend all this money for things that are already expired and I'm going [...] to have them in the cupboard for a few more days, or week s. No, that's not for me. If it's overdue they should give it for free, maybe [for visitors], people who don't belong, you can come here once a year or twice a year, not that we have to pay with our money for overdue items." Male, Focus Group 1

"They've got lots of time over-dated food, mainly cans, some vegetables too" Female, Focus Group 1

The belief was that food close to or beyond the use-by date is not merely a quality issue, but also one of dignity. Some respondents talked about the way they, as recipients of food relief, are offered food, which the general population would not be expected to eat.
some services were more suited to the needs of individuals, rather than family-oriented. For example sit down meals were not always thought to be compatible with families where young children require special attention. Furthermore it was sometimes the case that the food supplies did not always meet the needs of families and that a one size fits all approach was evident. The lack of equity of need is apparent in the next quote.

“If a mother and father and two kids goes in to get a food parcel and I go in, they’ll get exactly what I got. They might get a couple of little extras but that’s it and you think ‘you’re just going to survive on that?’ And if I’ve got stuff in my bag that I’ve got that I need to cook it, I’ll pull it all out and go ‘there you go, have that’ and give it to them because they’ve got kids. Kids need the food more than what adults do because they’re growing up. They’re growing up and need all the nutrients and vitamins and stuff to get them through the day whereas a lot of adults don’t.” Male, Focus Group 1

Some services did not protect or shield children from the possible stigma of accepting food relief. One parent said this was the reason why sit-down meals would not be an advantage.

“I would not take my kids [to sit-down or shared meals] because I would not want them to know I was struggling” Female, Focus Group 7

Not enough food
One participant spoke of the time taken and waiting for seated meals and missing out.

“Handing of food out is a little bit long, it’s all over the place and I’m sat there sometimes and they’ve fed everyone in the whole room and I’m like ‘when are you going to feed me? I’m the last person and I’m still waiting for the food. I go ‘stuff this, I’m sick of this joint. I’m going to [X] Street because you don’t have to wait.’ ” Male, Focus Group 1

4.3.3 What works about services overall

No judgement
Non-judgemental volunteers, staff and services were valued as participants already felt the stigma of needing to use services.

“For not judging them, you know, like ‘thank you for just accepting us. Thank you for being here for us.’ ” Female, Focus Group 5

“They do judge you.” Male, Focus Group 7

“Oh, definitely they do.” Female, Focus Group 7

“Yeah.” Male, Focus Group 7

“You don’t get judged here, put it this way.” Female, Focus Group 7

Volunteers creating a sense of belonging
The importance of being able to engage with volunteers to create a sense of belonging and community was described. Becoming a volunteer yourself was a means to break isolation, give back and “not sit at home” and like feeling like part of a family [Focus Group 7].

“[X] Road at [Y suburb] and that’s the better one of the two. The lady in there is absolutely wonderful and, yeah, it’s just – it’s like a little home. You get in there and it’s like going home. You can have a coffee.” Female, Focus Group 4

“They talk to you about the recipes, you know, that if you put this in there and put that in there and change it to this way - and then the people that are actually there weighing the meat and putting it into the right size that you need and things like that, there’s actually men back there doing it; it’s not just all women volunteering there’s actual men.” Female, Focus Group 4
Communication – Facebook

“Well, wherever I’m closer to at the time or whatever’s got specials on. They [X service] put on Facebook ‘got a special here’. I bought so many of these pull up nappies and then I didn’t even like go through a packet and my son’s like ‘no, that’s it’. Got toilet trained and I’m stuck with all these nappies so I just like gave them to my sister. They were really, really cheap so I was like ‘woohoo’ and bought heaps.” Female, Focus Group 5

4.3.4 What works about the food

Choice
Repeatedly respondents talked about the need for choice when receiving food to address food insecurity. Most respondents had experiences where they were provided with food parcels where food was unfamiliar or poorly thought out. This is not only wasteful but also degrading for recipients. On the other hand, where respondents were able to choose, albeit in a limited way, there was a great deal of satisfaction. The processes that appeared to work best were those that were almost mainstream in their operation; for example, ‘supermarket’ style arrangements where shoppers could select items that would fit the budget and the individual or family likes and dislikes.

“I’m interested - the one that you actually pay for, you’re paying for food here, albeit at a reduced price, is more appealing than one where you get food for nothing, as it were, so that interests me.”

“There’s more variety [here] and you get a lot more value for money” Male, Focus Group 7

“It depends on what you get to pick” Female, Focus Group 7

“And you can pick your own. Sometimes you don’t get to pick what’s in your food hamper and it’s like ‘dude, why would I need this?” Female, Focus Group 7

Free or discounted to about 80%
Offering choice and heavily discounted food with dignified food selection processes is a priority – if people have the resources to pay. A [X service] recipient described how this currently works.

“Here there is a white board with a list of perishable items for sale – butter, eggs, milk, some meat and frozen meals – all priced. 50c for 1 Litre of milk, $1 for 2 litres, frozen meats $2, tray of 30 eggs $5, butter, $2. People state what they want, are given a labelled ticket and pay. They then take the ticket to the kitchen where they are given the specific items listed.” Male, Focus Group 5

“At this point in the flow of customers, people pay in cash or card. [The manager] has set up an EFTPOS terminal using her phone and a device (square white thing that sits on the table) called “The Square”. People use their credit cards to tap and go on the square. Receipts are sent via email.” Male, Focus Group 5

Dignifying food provision processes
Many of the services used by respondents were deemed to be based on the ethics of charity and benevolence. While respondents were appreciative of this they also discussed the ways in which some services provided them with dignity and respect.

“Not a margin of society. You know, it’s not exactly a proud moment when anyone goes and gets a food hamper, or what not. A place like this, you know, gives a bit of dignity that you’re able to get back.” Female, Focus Group 3

People were highly critical of appointment-based services (used by numerous agencies) that asked lots of questions about why you needed help, income details and how money was spent. They felt judged and patronised. For example, having to bear your soul to a complete stranger – banking, financial, spending details was seen as embarrassing and uncomfortable. As was, the rules about how many times services could be used. Often as part of the assessment procedure, people seeking food
assistance were referred on to financial counsellors. However, this was seen as unhelpful as no amount of financial counselling will address insufficient income. Many people were astute money managers; the main issue was lack on income, bill shocks, unanticipated expenses and the increasing cost of utilities.

“They [the service] look down on you before they give you a voucher.” Female, Focus Group 6

“Felt like we were imposing when asking for food from a church.” Female, Focus Group 6

The indignity of the interrogation involved with some services was particularly shameful. One participant said that she had recently made 29 phone calls to get through to a service. Clients sometimes have to wait for three days for an appointment. There is a perceived indignity to this.

4.3.5 Appropriateness and effectiveness by food model

1. Food parcels

One participant noted the change in food parcels in some locations and that the nutrition content was improving because they had dietitians to assess them.

“They’ve [Co-op] been around for 20-odd years only in the last four years they’ve actually got the dietitians in to put together the meal packs so that they are dietarily [sic] substantial for a family of four catering for two adults and two children. Before they were just kind of throwing stuff together to make a meal whereas they’ve got dietitians in to actually go through the nutritional value of the meal now.” Male, Focus Group 5

2. Food pantries

Food pantries were valued and considered superior to food parcels because they enabled participants to choose their food, and sometimes other necessities. However, access was limited in terms of number of items and times per year, and eligibility was based on proof of need. Some homeless participants in Focus Group 1 ranked food pantries as the most preferred based on choice.

“[X centre] is good because they allow you to pick your own food, what you want…”

“You can pick up five things and I say ‘look, all right. I’ve got the pasta, I’ve got the sauce. Can I pick up’ - ‘no, no, five items” Female, Focus Group 1

3. Seated meal services, an abundance of food, social interaction and fear of missing out

Some services provided seated meal services and access to food pantries. Participants appreciated food prepared for them and spoke of nutritious foods and people working to give them a meal.

“I think it’s a good thing, yeah. It’s a tremendous service and, you know, it gives you a cheap meal. I tend to think, yeah, especially if you haven’t got a house, I mean because, you know – or you haven’t got a kitchen.” Male, Focus Group 2

“Yeah or a can opener.” Male, Focus Group 2

“A sit down meal, yeah, if you’re truly homeless.” Male, Focus Group 2

“You sit down, they’ll come round and they’ll give you tea, coffee, drinks. Ladies will be sitting there cutting up fruit and all that and making fruit salads.” Male, Focus Group 1

“The [Y service] you only get one meal, one soup, one main meal and one dessert whereas [X Street] you can have ten soups, ten main meals and as much dessert as you can fit in your guts. I go there and have like nine bowls of ice cream and then go down the [Y service] what did you have for dessert [Name]?” Male, Focus Group 1
“Not only that, when they finish that, every Saturday before the main meal comes out at [Y service], they open the food room up and you go in there and you get food. They just give away heaps of stuff, all the time.” Male, Focus Group 1

Social interaction with volunteers and others was an important part of the seated meal service and this was a point participants compared services on.

“With [X Street] they'll serve you a meal and they'll sit down beside you and eat the meal with you and talk to you whereas a lot of the [Y service] workers, they'll hand the meals out and they won't even sit down and talk to you.” Male, Focus Group 1

“I'd rather the person that's handing the meal out, when you've finished handing the meals out sit down and talk to us, spend time with us. Don't just hand the meal out and go 'zoom' and take off and go somewhere else.” Male, Focus Group 1

“The social. [X Street] I'd rather go to because they sit down and talk and laugh and have fun and everything like that and Salvos…” Male, Focus Group 1

“Yeah and it's also a social interaction too.” Male, Focus Group 2

Additional services such as frozen take-away meals or a co-op with sit down meals were valued by some participants. Also, seated meal services needed to be located with easy access.

“[X Street], straightaway when you actually get there you put your name down for a takeaway and then literally some people eat it that night but for me, actually having somewhere to go I actually can stack them up in my freezer, if it's something I can eat, then if I start to struggle at least I now I've got that out in the freezer to get out later, if I need it.” Male, Focus Group 1

“I think I'll go for the co-op and food—what do you call it, you can go in there and have a meal?” Female, Focus Group 2

“At the end of my street, my girls go to church every Monday here and, you know, they'll sit in and have a lunch, you know what I mean, or bring home the takeaways, you know, so yeah, that's what I'm saying, them services are really good too.” Female, Focus Group 4

Seated meals were greeted with enthusiasm by most with the exception of one woman worried about the food service.

“No, and the one I'd use least is like sit down where they cook the food because I'll be scared that I'll catch something.” Female, Focus Group 2

People were willing and keen to volunteer at seated meal services

“You organise it and I’ll work in it. I am a qualified cook.” Female, Focus Group 4

The eligibility criteria and process was important as well as the friendliness of the service.

“I've been to a couple where you just go and they give you food, they chat to you and then you 'bye'. They don't ask you anything about yourself other than to have a chat and they're quite friendly. The ones that I've gone to have been quite friendly.” Female, Focus Group 5

4. Social café

There was generally an enthusiasm for social café concept as they provided an opportunity to interact and eat with or like 'normal' not 'needy' people with dignity. The café concept was especially appealing because it represented an ability to take children out for a special meal, (such as a birthday) was considered desirable, but currently beyond reach. Although for some the issue of not being able to take children of other family members, and the agency assessment of eligibility seemed like a barrier. There
was extensive conversation in a number of the groups about the eligibility criteria and process and how it needed to be inconspicuous.

“If I could go somewhere that didn't make me feel degraded to ask for help, that'd be awesome.” Female, Focus Group 5

“Like you can catch up with all of your other friends that can't afford stuff, go out for like lunch once a week.” Female, Focus Group 5

“With a place like that it would be awesome but then you've got to get over yourself as well because walking in, if there's normal cafes around you everyone knows what that is so everyone knows you can't afford stuff.” Female, Focus Group 5

“The scheme is for isolated single people not families. I would like to take my kids out for a special meal of birthday lunch but I don't want them to know we are struggling, we gotta protect the kids.” Female, Focus Group 5

One homeless participant highlighted a need for additional services so as to ‘not stand out’ in a café and liked the idea of being able to share their experience with other people who don’t live as they do.

“Even if you were – had a shower, well dressed, well respected you'd still sit down with normal people who go and work in a building or business and you could still sit there and talk and have a conversation and ‘where do you live?’ ‘Well, I live on the streets’ ‘Oh what's it like?’ They'll ask questions ‘what's it like living on the streets and how do you survive?’ and stuff.” Male, Focus Group 1

5. Social Supermarkets

The social supermarket concepts were greeted with enthusiasm by some focus group participants, particularly if it was combined with other services, for example, a seated café.

“I had a chance to be in one of them in Paris – I mean this. It's very popular. Yeah. [At the same one] is a shop selling food. The other side is a cafeteria. You sit, you can eat there. You pay the discount. I go inside and inside was like a supermarket and the other side was a cafeteria and just very successful. Always lots of people. Open seven days.” Male, Focus Group 2

One participant preferred the independence of the supermarket to feeling like they are receiving alms from church groups.

“More publicly accessible to people if they knew that they could go to these supermarkets and get their food cheaper. Rather than creating a mindset that people have that they go to the church to receive alms, sort of thing, they could go to a supermarket and get this food cheaper and feel like they're part of a group that are working on ways to save costs. It'd be better for the person rather than feel like they've got issues about having to go to the church to get food, I tend to think.” Male, Focus Group 2

Participants described the value and human difference provided by food relief services compared to commercial supermarkets.

“Yeah, I was going to say there's also that element of that personalised service here that they don't seem to get – with all due respect to the bigger stores like Coles and Woolies, that they don't get in such a way that there might be times they might be serving at the dollar table and we might call out ‘can you give this customer a hand to take something out to their car?’ Now Coles or Woolies, with all due respect to them, probably wouldn't do that either.” Male, Focus Group 5

Support services available in social supermarkets such as preparing resumes or re-training for future employment opportunities were valued by some participants.
“That sounds very – is it the one where - you know like you were saying where you can sit down and your resumes and things like that?... Yeah, that’s very interesting to hear about because that’s something you wouldn’t have in half the programs that they run.” Female, Focus Group 4

“Give kids skills to volunteer and do work so that they can go get a job.” Female, Focus Group 7

Lots of positive comments re: this idea of gaining experience as a pathway towards skill development and employment, for a “

hand up, not handout”.

6. Co-ops

Some participants liked the idea of a co-op due to the lower food prices and felt that it was a “little more mainstream” and that “you don’t have to lower yourself down, not embarrassing.” Female, Focus Group 7. There was also an appreciation of reciprocity with the concept of a co-op. Respondent’s spoke about a 24 hour area where people could prepare food and they sold meat which was something missing from many of the services.

“That’s a good idea, 80 per cent.” Male, Focus Group 1

“Eighty per cent is good.” Female, Focus Group 1

“It’s called ‘the co-op’ and you go in and you buy meals that are prepacked; they’re not cooked but they’re prepacked. You get everything you need to cook that meal and the recipe and it’s like $6 and it will feed four, five adults.” Female, Focus Group 4

“They do meal packs up and you can buy them for about five – they supply the meat, the vegetables, pasta and all the sauces, you just put it together. They give you a little recipe and you follow that. You get a variety of things.” Female, Focus Group 5

“Yeah, I like that you can give -- that you feel like you’re giving back and not just taking.” Female, Focus Group 2.

“And they have a shop 24/7 where they can bring in their volunteers to prepare all the stuff where we’ve got the haul for the day to come and do what we need to do.” Female, Focus Group 5

The concept of buying in bulk did not seem to work for many who did not have a ‘freezer’ or could not use large amounts of food and did not want to waste any. There were also concerns about making co-ops more accessible, providing transport.

“If they made it more accessible to people, like transport and things like that. I can’t get down there a lot. I don’t drive, you know, so if it was in more of an accessible spot.....” Female, Focus Group 5

Right. So number one might be co-operative or it might be social supermarket; is that what people are saying?

“I think co-operative, due to volunteering and community.” Male, Focus Group 2.

“Yeah, but people could be working on an idea of providing food for – and people could contribute to that facility, if you know what I mean, and providing food for people on a regular basis, so people would be going there for meals and working in the garden and socialising and you could end up having a 24 hour service there.” Male, Focus Group 2

The dietitians developed nutritious pre-packed meal packs with recipes offered by some services were described

“I know they’re supplied by [Food donor]. I’m not sure who is behind them themselves but I went with a support group the other day to kind of a behind the scenes information thing for the food co-op and they were saying as much as they’ve been around for 20-odd years only in the last four years they’ve actually got the dietitians in to put together the meal packs so that they are dietarily
substantial for a family of four catering for two adults and two children. Before they were just kind of throwing stuff together to make a meal whereas they've got dietitians in to actually go through the nutritional value of the meal now.” Female, Focus Group 5

**How much is a meal?**

“It depends what you buy. They range from $4.50 to $8 something. It's like you can be ‘I've only got $50; what am I going to cook this week?’ You go in there, you buy all of your food for the week and that's it, you're done. You know that you don't have to buy like a big thing of like paprika just to get a teaspoon.” Female, Focus Group 5

**Okay so that's a bit of a winner, is it?**

“Yep.” Female, Focus Group 5

Some focus groups had heard about but not used co-ops.

“They had a show on that on [FM], an English show was on this co-operative when they first started. Interesting, because the idea is to keep the prices down.” Male, Focus Group 2

The fact that co-ops sold other items like toiletries or toys was also valued by some:

“And they sell other things as well, like shampoo, soap.” Female, Focus Group 5

“I bought toys; I got toys for Christmas.” Female, Focus Group 5

7. Food hubs

Although some participants in some groups were unaware of food hubs, the concept was liked due to the heavily discounted or free (fruit, vegetables and bread) food. In one group participants were concerned that the concept was not sustainable due to rental costs in the numerous suburban locations. Access was also a concern for some who were not sure how they would get to food hubs.

“Yeah, so t[in the suburbs] the cost of the rent and that on these places, you know, if they get a place it’s going to cost them money so straightaway they're under the eight ball. Real estate's a big problem for a lot of these ideas. If the real estate costs you, say…” Male, Focus Group 2

“But you've got to get to them for a start.” Male, Focus Group 2

8. Other ideas: Community Kitchen

Community kitchens were talked about for the homeless or people who are living in their cars so that they can heat up a meal or put something in a fridge.

Yeah, it’s not a bad idea at all.

“Yeah. I think the stigma should be the highlight I think and you shouldn't be made to feel embarrassed because, you know, you're sort of in need.” Male, Focus Group 2

4.4 Recipients’ perspectives on how to meet the needs of the food insecure.

4.4.1 Address the determinants of food insecurity

Welfare adequacy

An adequate income was the obvious solution to moving out of the need for food relief. There was a suspicion that the assessment of the appropriateness of food relief services was about government wanting to replace welfare entitlements with allocation for rent and food.

“…the government’s organising this …yeah, they’re breaking up the people’s entitlements into food and rent. I can sort of see on one hand what you’re advocating here is how to improve the service
but also I can sort of see that possibly the government’s looking at the amount of money going through these services and how they can actually change the system to give people food cans which are going through the system to displace part of their entitlement so people won’t be getting an entitlement, so we get our food allocation and rent allocation. “Male, Focus Group 2

4.4.2 Provide appropriate types and amounts of food

Extend the shelf-life of food products
Comments here about foods that are close to and sometimes beyond use-by-date. Particular attention to these being sold on, when they were donated as free items to be given freely not sold.

Healthy food
The inappropriateness of junk food and the need for healthy or basic foods (like fruit and vegetables, meat, bread, milk) was discussed in some of the focus groups.

“Junk food is inappropriate but some people get used to it.” Female, Focus Group 7

“You can’t get much for $20, you can’t afford a healthy meal, you can’t afford meat.” Male, Focus Group 7

Fairness – e.g. amount of food for singles and families
Generally there was not always good understanding of the needs of families. Many services cater for singles (mostly men) without consideration of family context. Focus on men may be more likely with some of the mission arrangements, such as breakfast and lunch in the parklands.

4.4.3 Promote dignity, choice and empowerment

Dignity
The provision of services that were built on dignity was discussed by many of the groups. Respondents often thought that they were being judged, especially during case assessment for eligibility.

“Sometimes they made you feel like you’re just a number and ‘well, you should be able to manage your money a bit better’.” Female, Focus Group 7

“Or they think your appearance, the way you look, means you must have food. I’ve even — I’ve come across someone even working here once before that said you go on how people look but you don’t always.” Female, Focus Group 7

The place of dignity and respect speaks to the principles under which food provisioning organisations operate. Respondents said they were very astute in picking up judgemental behaviour from staff, which impacted on the dignity of the service.

Choice
Recipients who are rendered powerless by their situation want to reassert their choice, power and sense of control over their lives by making choices at food relief services. For example, being able to select much needed items (albeit a limited number) from a food pantry or pack your own hamper was viewed as an improvement.

Equity
The issue of equity of access to services was raised in a number of focus groups. For example, the Elizabeth Downs co-op, which was generally seen to be very well run, is not available to those who live outside walking distance but don’t have a car. It was also noted that Adelaide has more diverse services, though not always better services, than country areas.
4.4.4 Streamlined and appropriate processes

Efficiency
The [X service] volunteers collect and bring the food items and display materials etc. to each location. There is a lot of set up each time and a lack of efficiency. There are also inefficiencies relating to the food provided, for example, all the bread is unsliced in the loaves that are donated so volunteers take the bread home and bag individual loaves in plastic bags.

There were also examples on location where the interviewers observed donated bread wraps being re-packaged into smaller portions to give away to recipients. Volunteers wore gloves and handled food – placing it onto smaller trays, again a re-handling of food to make it suitable for use and distribution.

Information on operations – opening hours, logistics and service options
Services should be encouraged to communicate their times of operation and processes to potential participants.

“…you must say to the organisation to put the [times] or something on the front. No-one knows when you’re open and when you’re closed. I see a lot of people come, whinging outside.” Male, Focus Group 2

Although some participants had an extensive knowledge of where to get food, particularly the homeless in need of emergency food relief, services need to inform potential recipients about the types of options available and their eligibility requirements

“I don’t know about this card, what’s that? For somebody who’s on disability?” Female, Focus Group 2

“I thought for membership that you had to provide your concession or pension card to be able to shop there” Female, Focus Group 5

Eligibility processes
Services should co-ordinate to lessen the recipient burden in the eligibility process. The mantra of the Heart and Soul service was that

“We don’t exclude anyone, we don’t assess or ask questions or give financial counselling.” Female, Focus Group 5

“The system you use here is good because everyone have a right to go two, three times a year to go to have access to this.” Male, Focus Group 2

Seated meal services – nice atmosphere
Participants who were homeless liked the idea of seated meal services and cafes, however, some commented that it was important to maintain an appropriate atmosphere, for example, free from screaming children.

“It’s a nice atmosphere, you know, but if everyone could keep the noise down a bit.” Male, Focus Group 1

Non-church based service for some
There were some discussions regarding a food relief system that involved multiple coordinated providers and did not rely entirely on charity from organisations such as churches.

“Yeah, you could have a facility that could provide the whole lot; that’s what I mean. If the government took over the role and used volunteer help, like people having to work for the dole actually working, involved in there, and it would be a – the security aspects and all that would be catered to and the recycling of food put through that system and people could benefit without the system being commandeered by the church, which has antiquated ideas about their services. If the
government could get involved somehow through co-operatives to utilise the services without any religious philosophy or connotations to the recipient then it probably would be a lot better.” Male, Focus Group 2

“I was just saying that this establishment is church run and I see it running quite well so I can’t – I disagree with you.” Male, Focus Group 2

4.4.5 The ideal food service model for people who are food insecure

A ‘fit for purpose’ model
Many ideas about how a hybrid system might be able to address the main problems with current individualised programmes. Clearly there cannot be a one size fits all model. There was support for some of the ideas that were brought to the focus groups from other jurisdictions, for example the social supermarket and the cooperative models. The membership idea was particularly approved of. The possibility of members developing skills and other capacities that may assist them become more food secure. Provide a service, which is flexible, responsive and places the locus of control with the person seeking assistance. Services that dispense with strict rules, assessments, eligibility criteria and automatic referrals onto financial counselling services were preferable.

Mainstream and normalise service delivery
Respondents often favoured those services that were closest to mainstream. For example, the meal box, complete with ingredients and recipe, that was spoken about [in one group] is a carbon copy of the boxed meals that are currently enjoying some fame in capital cities (see for example, Hello Fresh www.hellofresh.com.au). Also, the Social Spoon idea whereby there are heavy discounts on special items in cafes and restaurants, look similar to the Groupon scheme where restaurants have special menu at reduced price for Groupon voucher holders. The ability to design services that mimic more mainstream arrangements needs to be considered seriously.

4.4.6 Preference for food service models
Cards with images and brief descriptions of services were ranked in order of preference in each focus group. There were differences in the order of preferred services across the groups, partly due to the differences in the nature of the participants seeking food relief. Participants ranked each service against all others and preferences usually favoured free or heavily discounted food and dignified processes with attention to food suitability and access issues including location or transport options.

“The price is way lower. Other than - other people that are going in there you have – if you don’t have to get a voucher for it you don’t have to feel that you’ve lowered yourself down to that level. It’s embarrassing going in to get a parcel. I’ve gotten past it because I’ve gone ‘you know what, the service is there to help; I’ll go do it’ but when I was younger I was like ‘I’m not poor. I’m not going…” Female, Focus Group

“It’s your pride. Your pride is smashed and that’s less likely to…” Female, Focus Group 7

4.4.7 Ranking of food service models
Respondents were asked to rank five current service models on the basis of most likely to meet needs, rank 1 most likely to meet needs to rank 5, least likely. They were asked to rank three services current operating interstate and overseas in the same way, from rank 1 most preferred to rank three least preferred. See Table 2 for model ranking by focus group.

Participants described an ideal food relief model as one that would combine elements of food co-operatives, social supermarkets, and cafes and a blend of additional services including to assist the transition our of food insecurity. The potential for food relief services to contribute to providing pathways out of poverty by linking with services, for example there was a desire for training or development to support work readiness, or to address practicalities such as laundry, showers and toiletries or telephone charging: “The Bitsa model, with bits a this and bits a that”, a “one stop shop”, Focus Group 5.
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<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Parcel</th>
<th>Pantry</th>
<th>Seated Meal</th>
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*The term food hub had various meanings. In some groups it referred to a model similar to a co-operative where a small membership fee is paid to access cheap food. In one example members had to spend $5 before they could access the free bread, fruit and vegetables.

During the ranking exercise, participants discussed the reasons for their preferences, and the pros, cons and recommendations to improve models are presented in Table 3. The table also includes some of the recommendations to improve the service models or to make them acceptable to respondents.
Table 3. Summary of the discussions regarding the pros and cons of each service model and recommendations to improve

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Seated meal services</td>
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| • More suitable for sub-groups (Homeless, single adults, elderly or older people, families e.g. after church) | • Adults want a nice, quiet atmosphere  
• Families with young children make too much noise  
• Do not want children to experience the stigma  
• Charge a fee  
• Can miss out and takes too long to serve food  
• Sometimes run out of food  
• No-one sits down, talks to you  
• Agency referral needed | • Combine with other services  
• Maintain dignified atmosphere  
• Target food service to client base  
• Universal eligibility  
• Engage with recipients |
| • Suitable if no cooking facilities: (a kitchen itself, stove or fridge, utensils e.g. can opener, pots, pans, cutlery, kettle; utilities – e.g. power)  
• Best with other services (e.g. shower, phone charging)  
• Meaningful interaction with volunteers | | |
| Parcel | | |
| • Been around for a lot of years  
• Grateful for emergency food when have nothing | • ‘Harsh’ eligibility criteria  
• Inappropriate amount of food for family  
• Inappropriate types of food for special diets  
• Inadequate nutritious foods  
• Cannot choose foods  
• Short term 1-3 day solution  
• Food expires if you get more  
• Incomplete meals –no meat  
• Homeless people cannot carry | • Respectful and dignifying eligibility processes  
• Appropriate amounts and type of food to suit nutrition needs (e.g. meat, recipes, full meals, nutritious foods length of time to cover) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pantry</td>
<td>Allows choice</td>
<td>Limits to number of items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toiletries, washing powder &amp; and other household items</td>
<td>Close to expired food</td>
<td>Reduce waiting times for appointments and streamline or revamp the telephone appointment system e.g. could institute free calls or 1800 number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh produce</td>
<td>Limited types of foods, e.g. meat</td>
<td>Appropriate amounts and type of food to suit nutritional needs:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suitable if access to cooking facilities is available</td>
<td>Can only use twice a year</td>
<td>- meat, recipes, full meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Must demonstrate need, and difficulty securing an assessment appointment via phone (if no phone credit, agency phone lines constantly engaged).</td>
<td>- nutritious foods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not enough appointment slots available per day.</td>
<td>Ensure food amount is adequate for sufficient number of days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If unsuccessful, must wait up to 3 days for appointment, yet food assistance need is immediate.</td>
<td>Increase access - Open during school holidays, weekends and other major holidays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not suitable if no utensils etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Card Voucher</td>
<td>Allows choice</td>
<td>Amount (often $20) is not enough in mainstream economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can buy other essential items</td>
<td>‘Harsh’ eligibility criteria</td>
<td>Consider cards that would enable purchases from alternative food businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to carry</td>
<td>Only allowed to spend at major supermarket chains where food is expensive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dignifying and ‘normal’ way to acquire food</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-op</td>
<td>Dignifying</td>
<td>Membership fee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourable reports of dietitian assessed low-cost food packs with recipes for preparing at home</td>
<td>Having to pay for food for some who have no income</td>
<td>Consider location accessibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toiletries, toys etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase access - Open during school holidays, weekends and other major holidays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best with other services such as seated meals)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cafe</td>
<td>Pros</td>
<td>Cons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                    | • Allows access to mainstream café – normalising experience  
|                    | • Helps isolated individuals  
|                    | • An outing for a special occasion or treat                                                                   | • Eligibility and assessment process by an agency  
|                    |                                                                                                                | • Meal subsidy is time limited  
|                    |                                                                                                                | • Doesn’t allow for family members and children  
|                    |                                                                                                                | • Dependent on café partners in their local area                                                   | • Remove eligibility and agency assessment criteria, and/or design discreet referral processes  
|                    |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                    | • Include accompanying children and family members  
|                    |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                    | • The idea of a community sausage sizzle was proposed which would have a similar outcome i.e. reduced social isolation and provide a treat/family outing  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social supermarket</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|                    | • Opportunity for capacity building and volunteerism  
|                    | • Associated café providing cheap meals  
|                    | • Membership and discounted food  
|                    | • Supermarket style set up, can exercise individual food choice  
|                    | • Other services can be accessed via the social supermarket – the idea of linked services valued  
|                    | • One stop shop  
|                    | • Opportunity for socialisation, community connection                                                           | • Stocked with food that may be expired or close to use by date. This means purchased food may have a shorter life span | • Increase access - Open during school holidays, weekends and other major holidays  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Hub</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|                    | • Membership based  
|                    | • Reward / incentive program  
|                    | • Discounts towards end of year Christmas hampers (pertaining to Foodbank SA hampers)  
|                    | • Free bread, fruit and vegetables                                                                             | • Agency issued vouchers, which require assessment appointments, viewed as judgemental, embarrassing and undignified  
|                    |                                                                                                                | • Goods that are unsaleable or approaching their use by date, or expired                                 | • Anonymous interaction with no agency assessment or referral process  
|                    |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                    | • Membership with an associated rewards scheme for every dollar spent  
|                    |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                    | • Blended model – some free food and some for purchase at reduced cost.  
|                    |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                    | • No indignity, no judgement  
|                    |                                                                                                                |                                                                                                    | • Increase access — Open during school holidays, weekends and other major holidays  

5. DISCUSSION

It is important to interpret the key findings of this research within context, namely Australia is a rich industrialised country, but with increasing numbers of its citizens experiencing food insecurity and relying on food relief in the 21st century.

In this section, some key findings of this research will be discussed, leading to the development of a set of key recommendations based on the voices of food relief service recipients.

5.1 Pathways to food relief service usage

The pathways to food relief service usage in this current study were varied and multifactorial. Many of the reasons given for using food relief, such as homelessness, inadequate welfare payments, poverty, and un/under employment, speak to broader social policy failures, which is consistent with the findings of previous Australian research. Australia is a country with a comprehensive welfare safety net designed to protect the most vulnerable in our society. Despite this, every participant in this study was food insecure as they needed to rely on food relief in some capacity. This is unsurprising as the welfare safety net has not kept pace with inflation and the rising costs of living, thus people are increasingly relying on food relief to make ends meet. Governments in wealthy industrialised countries such as the UK, US, Canada and Australia have retreated from their human rights obligations with respect the Human Right to Food and left the bulk of the provision of food aid to under resourced food relief organisations, which are struggling to meet demand. The data in this study suggests that food insecurity and hunger are symptoms of material deprivation underpinned by income inequality, and this is consistent with other studies.

5.2 Current food relief service usage

There were various types of food service models currently being used by the participants in this study. Food provision was only one of the services that organisations provided, but not necessarily the main service. The presence of varied service models and differing requirements for eligibility criteria are consistent with a recent Melbourne study. It is also symptomatic of ad hoc and intermittent funding and a reliance on limited staff resources or volunteers.

The specific nature and extent of service usage emerged throughout the focus group discussions. Emergency food relief - one or two episodes to see someone through a difficult period - was described. In these instances, people sought food parcels, food from food vans and free bread from various agencies. However, participants described that, as well as being used for emergency short term food relief, services were used in a long term capacity as a response to episodic need, and they were also routinely used to address entrenched food insecurity. Food was sought from multiple services to meet these needs.

For the most part, long-term recipients had excellent knowledge about the many services on offer and eligibility criteria, and were able to “stitch together” enough help from a range of agencies to meet their basic food needs. Of concern was that some participants were unaware of services or how they worked, while others had an encyclopaedia-like knowledge of service days, times, opening hours, locations and eligibility criteria. This is similar to the findings in the Perth Food Study. The detailed knowledge of services is likely to reflect the intensity of need for food and ongoing need. Many participants’ descriptions of their use of food relief was as a long-term proposition, similar to findings in Western Australia and Tasmania. Food relief was needed on a daily food basis by some and in response to sporadic financial or other shocks by others, suggesting that there are both acute and chronic dimensions of food insecurity.

5.3 “Questionable Charity” – when things go wrong

Some of the research findings can be framed by what George Kent calls ‘questionable charity’. Despite the best intentions, ‘questionable charity’ occurs when efforts to assist people in need go wrong. In the context of food relief, emergency food relief helps people get back on their feet. However, continuing to provide long term food relief can remove hope and is disempowering. In short, it offers no pathway out of food insecurity, but can promote an entrenched reliance. Below is a discussion regarding service users’ critical views regarding “questionable charity.”
5.3.1 The negative emotional impact of being a recipient of food relief

The emotional impact described by some participants in this study were consistent with those reported in previous research, for example, ‘shame’, ‘embarrassment’, ‘degradation’, ‘humiliation’, ‘guilt’, ‘intimidation’ and ‘inequity’.

Despite these feelings, participants continued to use services because they had no other option and needed food. This is consistent with other studies.

The desire to shield children from demeaning or embarrassing situations with respect to receiving food relief was described in response to discussions about a normalised food setting.

Another way food assistance can go wrong is that assistance can sometimes be provided in ways that are judgemental and suggest a limited understanding of recipient needs on the part of the provider, staff member or volunteer. This was evident in the current study, particularly in relation to eligibility criteria for assessment of need and financial counselling.

5.3.2 Recipients views on food

“Leftover food for leftover people”

Recipients made many negative comments about the ‘type’, ‘quantity’ and ‘quality’ of food received from services. For example, expired food or food which was approaching its use-by-date was seen as unacceptable and impractical by many participants, even if enough food was provided, it could be unfit for consumption within a day or two. Offering food insecure people industrial food waste exacerbates feelings of unworthiness and an inability to participate in society — or as UK Emeritus Professor Elizabeth Dowler says, it is “Leftover food for leftover people”, a sentiment that was well described by the participants in this study. The following quote reiterates dissatisfaction with having to pay for food which is unsaleable:

“How stupid I am. I spend all this money for things that are already expired and I'm going [...] to have them in the cupboard for a few more days, or weeks. No, that's not for me. If it's overdue they should give it for free”

Indeed, Australia’s first surplus food supermarket, the Oz Harvest store in Sydney, provides free food for people in need. The authors do not suggest that surplus food has no place in the food relief system, but offer a note of caution. The proposal that unsaleable surplus food from the private sector is somehow an effective solution to long term food insecurity is misguided. The re-distribution of food waste to food relief services is unable to solve the wicked problem of food insecurity on its own as it does nothing to address the root causes (i.e. income insecurity and inequality). The widespread promulgation of this idea has attracted International criticism from academics and researchers.

“It’s making me sick”

A lack of food appropriate for managing chronic health conditions such as diabetes or allergies was noted by participants in regard to themselves or others. Being food insecure is a precursor for a range of physical and psychological health problems. This is important as international evidence demonstrates that the types of food provided by food relief agencies may exacerbate diabetes and other diseases. A Canadian study Tarasuk, et al (2015) found that food insecure individuals are less able to manage chronic health conditions and they consume 2.5 times the health care dollars of those who are food secure. Health economics notwithstanding, there is also a duty of care to ensure that the food provided to people who rely heavily on these services is healthy and meets their needs. The US has responded to this issue by introducing the concept of nutrition focussed food banking across the foodbank network. Participants described dissatisfaction with both the quality and quantity of the food provided and this is consistent with the literature.

“Gratitude”

Participants in all focus groups expressed gratitude for food, whether it was about the free day-old bread or meal packs with recipes. The concept of gratitude amongst food relief service recipients is well documented in the literature with services being described as “a god send” or “little lifelines”. Feelings of gratitude were also expressed despite limited choices and the fact the food provided may not be meeting individual needs. Linked to feeling of gratitude was the notion that “beggars, can’t be choosers” and the implicit
resignation, disempowerment or lack of control of their circumstances. This notion has also been documented in a recent Australian research in Adelaide and Perth and other work internationally. Because food assistance is mostly free is also associated with expectations of gratitude in response to what is essentially a gift. It is likely that people who express gratitude for services are unlikely to be critical to the system.

5.3.3 Harsh and undesirable need assessment processes
Negative and strong emotions were mostly mentioned in relation to the processes that participants were required to go through to ‘assess their need or eligibility for food’, and the impact of this was ongoing as assessments are repeated, every few months in some circumstances. Services which required telephone appointments to determine eligibility came under considerable criticism. Problems included agency phones being constantly engaged, participants being unable to get an appointment for several days, insufficient mobile phone credit for such purposes, and the limited number of appointments available. The language and depth of negative emotion was strong, and of major concern is that some participants reported not using the services because they were frustrated by these processes, did not have the capacity to get all the information together, or simply did not want to suffer the emotional consequence.

Feelings of ‘discomfort’, ‘failure’, ‘guilt’ and ‘intimidation’ in relation to the financial counselling sessions offered as part of, or a requirement of accessing, food relief services were described and overall these processes were described as ‘intimidating’. The overt and covert message from financial counsellors was described as ‘if I can manage my money then why can’t you?’ The authors note the utility of financial counselling services, which can provide an excellent opportunity for social capital transfer in regards to linking clients to benefits or opportunities which they may not be aware of. Nonetheless, high threshold barriers in terms of requisite documentation could be impediments to meeting clients ‘where they’re at’, and service barriers can and do exist where assessments misunderstand poverty (which is a structural issue) as a consequence of individual incapacity or profligacy. Focus group participants viewed financial counselling as ineffective and a waste of time as it failed to address the underlying issue of insufficient household income. The perception was that no amount of financial counselling or budgeting strategies would be sufficient to make ends meet – thus underlying the interconnection of food insecurity and low household income.

There is opportunity to improve recipients’ experience with regard to the Government of South Australia and Key Organisation’s Charter of Affordability Guiding Principle number 4: “We are committed to treating customers in financial stress with respect and compassion.”

In summary, this section has outlined significant ways in which, despite honourable intentions, food relief services are questionable. Collectively, these wrongs are aligned with Poppendieck’s (1998) deadly “in’s”, namely: (i) inaccessibility, (ii) inadequacy, (iii) inappropriateness, (iv) indignity, (v) inefficiency, (vi) insufficiency. There is no strong evidence in our data for the seventh deadly “in” of instability. However, anecdotaly agencies are known to have unstable funding sources. Considering further analysis of Poppendieck’s work by McIntyre (2016) against an ad

5.4 Aspects of food relief services that are currently working for recipients
The data also highlighted aspects of food relief service delivery that were well received by recipients. Aspects of choice, reciprocity and volunteering are the embodiment of citizen participation, dignity, personal agency and empowerment.

5.4.1 Choice
The ability to choose food within a food relief service was highly valued. For example, self-serve free bread racks in many of the sites were well patronised. People liked the ability to choose the food they wanted, be anonymous, then leave. These types of anonymous services are the antithesis of assessment appointments and may suggest that pre-packaged food parcels are sub optimal. Indeed, an international review of food
bank users in high income countries found lack of food choice led to individuals receiving items they didn't usually eat or did not know how to prepare, or to receiving food that was of poor quality. This suggests that services need to be flexible, tailored and responsive to allow individual choice and decision making.

5.4.2 Reciprocity and volunteering
Many of the focus group participants were not only food relief recipients, but also volunteered at the service. Volunteering at food relief services was spoken of positively in terms of purpose and camaraderie. Volunteers were able to offer instant connection to newcomers based on their shared experience of food insecurity. In this regard, volunteers constitute an excellent example of the benefits of a lived experience workforce. People who were not currently volunteers were keen to ‘give back’ in some way to the service that had or continued to help them. According to Mauss (1990) “a gift is received with a burden attached” and leads to a sense of disempowerment as the recipient is unable to reciprocate. The need for reciprocity in the context of gift giving (i.e. food) may explain the degree of volunteering evident, or intent to volunteer in food relief services.

Providing opportunities for recipient choice and reciprocity are empowering and can be considered participatory. Silvasti (2014) argues that participatory methods offer promising alternatives for deactivating food charity. Participatory methods refer to the active involvement of vulnerable people as a way to empowerment. Participatory methods offer two way learning and empowering dialogues for both food relief service staff and users. For food relief service staff, participatory methods are a way of avoiding “top down charity work”, and also a mechanism for listening to the voices of marginalised people. For food relief service users, participatory dialogue and other mechanisms offer a way to be validated, heard, understood and empowered. Participatory methods should be integrated into all South Australian food relief services that receive government funding.

5.5 The types of food relief services people want and need
Participants in this study were able to clearly identify a range of service delivery aspects and improvements that would enhance the experience of needing to rely on food relief. Many of these suggestions are consistent with the views of other food relief service users both in Australia and internationally. Some of the more salient aspects are discussed below.

5.5.1 Respectful, dignified and open to everyone
People valued a welcoming, respectful, dignified atmosphere with no rules about the amount of times assistance could be accessed. This is summed up in a quote from a volunteer participant who said “We don’t exclude anyone, we don’t assess or ask questions or give financial counselling.” The desirability of service elements such as ensuring the experience of receiving EFR was a dignified one are consistent with a recent Australian study.

5.5.2 Offers socialisation, commensality and connection
People living in poverty who are relying on food relief experience social exclusion and inequity with respect to social participation and food. Food is more than just nutrients and calories to appease hunger. Food embodies cultural and social meanings such as conviviality, comfort and connection. This aspect is often missing with within food relief services, especially for those who are long-term users. Creating an environment that promotes social interaction was considered important by participants, and this is consistent with recent Australian literature. In this context, the Finnish example of ‘collective meals’ is worthy of consideration. Collective meals are not a gift, but a meal purchase, albeit low cost. The aim of ‘collective meals’ is to prevent social marginalisation and loneliness.

5.5.3 Nutrition-focused and fit-for-purpose
Participants in this study had a strong desire for healthy food for themselves and their children. This was reinforced by disappointing experiences as illustrated by the quote, ‘Sometimes you don’t get to pick what’s in your food hamper and it’s like ‘dude, why would I need this?’ Recipients spoke of the need for more staple foods such as meat and fish, which go beyond regular offerings of pasta and pasta sauce. Food quality and nutrition is a recurrent theme in the literature both nationally and internationally. For example, food relief service users in Perth, WA clearly want more fresh food, including more fruit, vegetables and meals. Food provision, especially in mobile services, needed to move away from monotonous, cheap, staples of the lowest
common denominator such as pies, sausages, soups and sandwiches. Interviewees want food variety, higher quality, and fresh, healthy, contemporary food items. A desire for nutrition-focused fit-for-purpose food may be a mismatch for food services relying on donations that may not match recipient needs.

5.5.4 Putting the ‘Social’ into food relief services – alternative models

In considering several alternative models of food relief assistance, participants spoke positively about the idea of a blended service, i.e. one that encapsulates several aspects into a one stop shop. Responses to the social cafes concept were mixed, with some keen on the idea but not on the eligibility criteria applied to applicants by agencies. However, efforts to “mainstream” service delivery through restaurant or café partnerships may reduce the shame and embarrassment associated with accessing food relief. The concept is illustrated in a number of Australian programs such as the Café Meals program (Geelong) and the Social Spoons program in Melbourne. In Tasmania, four models of food relief service provision described by Hertzfield (2010) also encourage social interaction.

International examples of sit down meals for disadvantaged people have been around for decades in countries such as Germany and Spain. The Lobby Restaurants in Germany offers a three-course meal to both income earners and disadvantaged people with a tiered price structure. Restaurant staff include formerly homeless people, welfare recipients and the unemployed. Underpinning the Caritas homeless services in Spain is a framework of social inclusion. Programs of this type address the three vectors of exclusion, namely poverty, isolation and a lack of life orientation. Over 100 Caritas dining rooms provide meals. Each dining room has an attached waiting room where people can sit, read the newspaper or have a coffee before or after the meal. Other services include assistance from health professionals, showers, laundry and a notice board. The result is a comprehensive and supportive environment that facilitates social engagement and ‘normalises’ eating.

The concept of a blended service model, namely one providing socialisation, assistance with a range of services such as employment, skills development, training opportunities, work experience, and housing assistance was well received by participants. Indeed, in one focus group it was referred to as the “the Bitsa” model, i.e. made up of many “bits”. However, recent Australian research on barriers to the emergence of social enterprise initiatives in the Australian emergency food relief sector highlights systemic problems to the realisation of such models. These include resistance from powerful food donors and shortcomings of the Good Samaritan legislation.

5.5.5 Empowerment – alternative models

Clearly evident in our data is the need for food relief recipients to re-gain a modicum of control in their lives. In terms of food, this means re-establishing a locus of control such as paying for food (albeit at reduced prices), choosing food items and making other decisions such as offering to volunteer. Systems or services that offer rewards, loyalty schemes or a means of accruing a discount over time or cash back were seen as attractive. These aspects align with the concept of food democracy - citizens re-exerting control or influence over the food system. Food democracy involves active participation, transparency, and sharing information with others, and leads to the transformation of passive consumers to active food citizens who are empowered. Successful alternative models of food relief will incorporate elements of participation, active involvement and empowerment.

5.6 What didn’t come up

There was no discussion of the need for personal education or skills development with respect to cooking or budgeting classes. There is evidence in the literature that people living in poverty are often excellent money managers and resourceful and skilled home cooks. Food insecurity is not a problem of limited cooking skills or poor money management, but rather of people’s ability to afford and access the food they need.
6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 The vision

Based on participants views regarding food relief in South Australia, recipient-oriented services that encourage independence and autonomy as a pathway out of food insecurity are needed. The following vision has been crafted to reflect their over-arching desires:

**Vision:**

*A client-oriented service delivery encouraging independence and autonomy and a pathway out of food insecurity*

6.2 Recommendations for Action

The next steps for government and funded food relief services based on recipients’ feedback. The recommendations for action are mapped against the following themes:

1. Creating a collaborative and integrated food relief system (system)
2. Building skills and capacity to facilitate independence out of food insecurity (supporting capacity)
3. Improving health and nutrition outcomes (nutrition)
4. Role of Government (role of government)

The following eight recommendations for action are based on recipients focus group feedback:

**Recommendation 1: Acknowledge food insecurity as a product of income inequality and advocate for adequate income for all [SUPPORTING CAPACITY]**

Recognise that food insecurity is symptomatic of income inequality and inadequate income and work to support individuals to obtain an appropriate and ongoing income.

**Recommendation 2: Strengthen existing services to provide higher levels of client-centeredness and responsiveness [SYSTEM]**

Prioritise actions to improve food service models based on recipients’ recommendations including:

1. Increase access on weekends and holiday times
2. Develop realistic assessment of food need to meet nutrition needs
3. Streamline cumbersome assessment appointments and the processes
4. Make financial counselling optional, rather than mandatory
5. Relax ‘harsh’ rules / criteria about numbers of occasions of assistance per year to meet nutrition needs
6. Improve food quality and quantity
7. Provide food that is healthy and nutritious and doesn’t exacerbate chronic illnesses
8. Provide access to food preparation facilities and infrastructure, for example, provide community kitchen and utensils.

**Recommendation 3: Promote the principles of dignity and compassion [SYSTEM]**

Maximise client experience with regard to the Government of South Australia’s Charter of Affordability, Guiding Principle 4: “We are committed to treating customers in financial stress with respect and compassion.”
Recommendation 4: Promote the principle of citizen participation by maximising opportunities for choice and reciprocity [SYSTEM / SUPPORTING CAPACITY]

Promote choice, reciprocity and volunteering (where appropriate), which are the embodiment of citizen participation, dignity, personal agency and empowerment.

Recommendation 5: Embed and promote the social dimensions of food [SYSTEM]

Recognise and promote the concept that food is about more than just nutrients and calories to appease hunger - food is associated with cultural and social needs such as conviviality, comfort and connection.

Recommendation 6: Focus on nutrition [NUTRITION]

Develop, promote and embed nutrition-focused food relief policies and practices across the sector. Meet clients’ health needs and expressed desires by increasing the acquisition and provision of a wide variety of safe, nutritious, appropriate, good quality food (particularly fresh food) consistent with dietary recommendations.

Recommendation 7: Consider blended service models such as ‘the bitsa’ [SYSTEM / SUPPORTING CAPACITY]

Test the utility of the concept of a blended service model, providing universal access to nutritious food in response to short and long term food insecurity, and also socialisation and access to opportunities for volunteering where appropriate, participation, and linked services related to pathways out of food insecurity (assistance with employment, skills development, training, work experience and housing).

Recommendation 8: Develop a Client Service Charter for agencies funded to deliver food relief [SYSTEM / ROLE OF GOVERNMENT]

Develop and adopt a Client Service Charter applicable to food relief and related services. Ensure that the charter has a client-oriented focus, based on principles of services being:

1. Awareness that food insecurity is a product of income inequality
2. Client-centred
3. Dignifying, compassionate and respectful
4. Responsive
5. Non-judgement and non-stigmatising
6. Equitable
7. Empowering
8. Committed to choice, inclusion and participation
9. Committed to social connection
10. Nutrition-focussed
11. Focussed on pathways to food security
### 7. APPENDIX

#### 7.1 Focus Group Cards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. FOOD PARCELS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• People are assessed by an agency to see if they’re eligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parcels contain non-perishable / perishable food for about 3 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some agencies provide a standard parcel, others allow people to choose their preferred items.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. FOOD PANTRY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• People can choose their food items from the pantry stock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There may be limits on how many items people can choose and how many times the pantry can be accessed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. SUPERMARKET GIFT CARDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• People are assessed for eligibility by a local agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Issued in a range of dollar values (e.g. $20, $30 etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• For use in national supermarket chains for food items only.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. SEATED MEAL SERVICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A sit down meal provided by local agencies, churches and other social support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Offered at limited times during the week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lunch or dinner, usually prepared by volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Either free or at a minimal cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some seated meals include table service, others require self-service at a buffet table or lining up behind a manned counter to be handed the prepared meal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5. FOODBANK SA – COMMUNITY FOOD HUB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Food bank SA run onsite community food hubs / “shop”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Multiple locations – Bowden, Port Pirie, Edwardstown &amp; Elizabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accept cash or vouchers issued by local agencies such as the Salvo’s</td>
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<td>• Food prices much lower than regular stores</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Free bread, fruit and vegetables.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program Type</td>
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</table>
| **A. SUBSIDISED CAFE MEAL Programs** | - Encourages isolated community members to dine at participating local cafes to connect with others  
- People are referred into the programs from community health and other local agencies.  
- Members can receive two subsidized meals per week  
- Members pay a minimum of $2.50 per meal  
- The referring agencies will pay the balance of the meal up to $7.50. |
| **b. FOOD CO-OPERATIVES** | - Co-operatives are people-centred organisations that are owned, controlled and used by their members  
- A food co-op can be defined as “any outlet run by local people that is involved in supplying food for the benefit of the community, rather than for private profit”  
- Each member has an equal say in what the co-operative does  
- Co-operatives are based on values such as democracy, self-help & equity. |
| **c. SOCIAL SUPERMARKETS** | - Widespread across Europe  
- 12 months membership  
- Food discounted 80%. Members pay cash  
- Often have cafe attached selling cheap meals made with fresh produce  
- Connected to social service agencies (e.g. help people with issues such as employment)  
- Some paid staff but mostly volunteers, trainees. |
| **d. ON YOUR TERMS** | - The feel/purpose?  
- What would it look like?  
- Who gets to be included and how?  
- The food, types, quality, donation/free/subsidised?  
- Other? |

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE?  
WHAT WOULD BE IDEAL?
## 7.2 Focus Group Question Schedule

<p>| | |</p>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong></td>
<td>Welcome &amp; Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.</strong></td>
<td>What types of services have people been using in the last 12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.</strong></td>
<td>How appropriate and effective are these services at meeting people’s needs?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4.</strong></td>
<td>Discuss the pros and cons of each of the five types (food parcels, food pantry, supermarket vouchers, food hubs and seated meal services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.</strong></td>
<td>Repeat for Pantry/ Supermarket Gift cards / Seated Meal services / FBSA Community Food Hub</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6.</strong></td>
<td>Rank models in order of how likely you would be to use the services.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7.</strong></td>
<td>How charitable food services might look in a perfect world, what sorts of things would you like to see?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. REFERENCES


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