**‘Time to Digest’: Summary of Food Insecurity Research Seminar hosted by Community Food and Health (Scotland) and A Menu for Change**

**Wednesday 28th February 2018**

Despite the horrendous weather, twenty researchers, policy makers and community practitioners from across Scotland and beyond, took ‘time to digest’ and update each other on recent and up-coming food insecurity research, and consider how best to ensure learning is applied to policy and practice.

*Introduction*:

Bill Gray of Community Food and Health Scotland kicked off the session by setting the scene on why we need research which recognises not only the scale but also the nature and painful consequences of food insecurity. He also emphasised the need for any improved understanding to inform change and influence both policy design and delivery.

*Current research in Scotland - Update from A Menu for Change*:

Next Mary Anne MacLeod, Research and Policy Officer at A Menu for Change gave an overview of their project which is working to prevent the institutionalisation of food banks in Scotland. She then focused on the aims and emerging findings of the qualitative longitudinal research project being delivered by A Menu for Change. The research involves interviewing people with recent experience of significant difficulties affording food, and following up with them over a twelve-month period to understand how and why their situation might change.

*Food poverty and hunger in the UK – overview of wider research activity*

Dr Martin Caraher, Professor of Food Policy at City University, London then gave a presentation which covered research activity and policy and practice development on food insecurity across the UK. He focused on the drivers of falling incomes, reforms to the benefits system, and rising food prices pushing more people into food poverty. Examples of good practice in responding to food poverty included lobbying activity of Canadian food bank volunteers, and the development of local food movements in the UK.

*Panel discussion: research updates, gaps and priorities*

The presentations were followed by a panel discussion looking at recent work, evidence gaps and research opportunities, led by representatives from Pilton Community Health Project from Edinburgh, Central and West Integration Network from Glasgow and the Scottish Government.

Catriona Rooke, Senior Researcher from the Scottish Government’s Equality and Social Justice Analysis team updated on current and forthcoming work including first results from the measurement of household food insecurity in Scotland (due to report in September). She also highlighted key themes from the evaluation of the Fair Food Transformation Fund which is due to be published very soon.

Florence from Central and West Integration Network described the value of conducting participatory research in order to better understand the food insecurity experiences of BME groups. She also highlighted a current piece of work they are under-taking to map availability of culturally appropriate food in Glasgow.

Memes from Pilton Community Health Project spoke about their recent research project ‘Hungry for Change’ which looked at community-led responses to food insecurity in North Edinburgh. She emphasised that local communities need more support to be able to share their evidence and lived experiences of food poverty with politicians and other decision-makers.

Discussion among the seminar participants covered concerns, interests and challenges for food insecurity research.

*Priorities and interests relating to food insecurity research*:

* **Clarity and consistency of language**: The need to be clear and consistent in terms of both scope and terminology used by researchers and policy makers. Some felt the term ‘food insecurity’ lacked relevance to people’s everyday lives
* **Recognition of the broad spectrum of food insecurity experience**: Severe food poverty and emergency food aid were seen as a very important dimension but only one aspect of the problem which shouldn’t distract from or confuse accurate understanding and effective addressing of the full spectrum of the food insecurity experience.
* **More evidence on how to prevent food insecurity and the institutionalisation of food banks**: It was recognised that effective measurement and raised understanding can improve policy and practice, informing and underpinning social change, but that the North American experience highlighted that effective data and intelligence systems do not automatically inform or guarantee change. It was agreed that more learning is needed on how to prevent the institutionalisation of food banks.

*Challenges for community food practitioners in doing and sharing research*:

* Ensuring their evidence and the lived experience of those they work with on a daily basis is **valued and listened to at a policy level**.
* Having the **confidence and capacity** (ie that they feel encouraged and enabled) to undertake research, gather intelligence and share learning.
* A need to have **better access and engagement with the research community** and the learning they generate in as timely and appropriate a manner as possible, and preferably in a two-way relationship.

*Next steps:*

This was not the first cross-sectoral discussion on food insecurity research and there was an enthusiasm to keep up the momentum, continuing to involve all those with a contribution to make, exploiting learning from further afield.

A follow-up event is being considered for later on in 2018.