

Uncovering Barriers to Food Access during COVID with The Foodhall Project in Sheffield, UK

EXPLORE POTENTIAL COLLABORATIONS

This case study focuses on a collaborative partnership between the University of Sheffield and the Foodhall Project, which transitioned from a community kitchen to an emergency food parcel delivery service during COVID-19, revealing systemic barriers to food access and fostering innovative solutions through grassroots research and community engagement.

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During my PhD at the University of Sheffield (in England), I collaborated with a local community-based organization called the Foodhall Project (hereafter referred to as 'Foodhall'). Foodhall was a community kitchen and social eating space located in the heart of Sheffield. Its mission was to combat the combined issues of food waste and social isolation by bringing people together around food. Foodhall served hot meals cooked from surplus food in an open café on a 'contribute-what-you-can' basis.

LESSON LEARNED

"Just start showing up! You don't have to have a specific research idea that makes sense yet; you can be involved in community groups as both an advocate and a researcher. Go to learn and keep your ears open - you never know where things may lead. That's of course not to say that you can't come to the table with ideas, but just showing up and building relationships with the general community can also position you to be in the right place when something does come up – and the trust will already be in place."



Community member receiving food and essentials from Foodhall's front-of-house during COVID
Credit: Mark Harvey (iD8 Photography)

The space also hosted a number of branch projects and events such as bike workshops, movie screenings, lectures, and live performances. During the COVID-19 pandemic and imposed lockdown regulations, Foodhall temporarily transitioned to operate as an emergency food parcel delivery program. From March-July 2020, anyone in Sheffield could call Foodhall's helpline to request a food parcel that would be delivered to their home on the same or next day. This service required a wealth of volunteers in order to pick up surplus foods, cook pre-made meals, operate the helpline and front-of-house, sort and package parcels, and deliver them.

As a graduate researcher in sustainable, local food systems, I was naturally interested in and passionate about being involved in community food efforts in the city where I was living. Thus, I sought out Foodhall within the first year of my PhD (2018), volunteering infrequently and attending various community events hosted in space. During COVID, however, I became much more engaged with the project because of the increased need for volunteers.

LESSON LEARNED

“When you show up in community spaces, make sure you do so respectfully – don’t prescribe or preach, just learn and listen. Center your humanity: meet people as people, not as a researcher. Find common ground and interests as ways to connect. And if concerns do arise about your academic affiliations, listen, validate, and address them openly.”

While volunteering on the helpline and in the packing space, it became clear that many who requested Foodhall’s service (which was meant to be a last line of support) were doing so because they were unable to access more formal support services through the local city council or government, even though many were eligible. Together with other Foodhall staff and volunteers, we realized that these stories should be captured so that these issues – the reasons why so many were ‘falling through the cracks’ and being left behind during this time – could be shared widely to create more effective support programs and food policies in the future.

LESSON LEARNED

“Do not discount what appear to be ‘context-specific’ or ‘individual’ community issues as not relevant for broader research (i.e., “that’s a case study, that’s too specific, I won’t get funding for that!”). Often, the very complicated experiences of a particular community can actually bring much more nuanced and broader insight to what may appear to be ‘clear-cut’ issues on the surface. For example, most reports during the time categorized that the main barriers to accessing food during COVID were physical (i.e., because of isolation) or financial (lack of money); but what we found were the very nuanced contexts that led to these barriers, which were actually much more related to traumatic life experiences that coincided with COVID, other physical and mental health issues, and lacking or strained social networks.”

Although I was not a qualitative researcher by training, and this project was not originally envisioned as a part of my PhD research (which was more agriculture focused), I saw the importance of collaborating with Foodhall to capture these stories – and was well-positioned to do so as a volunteer in the space. Thus, I reached out to a human geography professor for supervisory support, and with Foodhall staff, we came up with an interview plan

and set of questions that would 1) help us better understand the barriers people were facing to accessing food and other forms of formal and informal support, and 2) help Foodhall improve the food delivery program and understand different avenues they could use to build community during the pandemic. In total, I interviewed 14 food parcel recipients during August 2020.

LESSON LEARNED

“Be open to broadening your research scope or expertise, and/or bringing others in to help you do so. We often suggest bringing in social scientists when doing community-engaged research, as drawing on lived experiences is so crucial to this work. Just because you may be trained as a scientist or engineer does not mean you can’t learn new qualitative research skills or begin bringing in more scientists who already have these skills.”

The results of the interviews were communicated with Foodhall and similar projects across the nation through presentations and a comprehensive report intended for public audiences. The report was also submitted to the Sheffield City Council to inform their review of food poverty across Sheffield, and finally, the results from the study were used to contribute to two Parliamentary inquiries on COVID-19 and food supply (written with Foodhall volunteers).

LESSON LEARNED

“See community experts as researchers; just because they may not be affiliated with a university, does not mean that they have not been doing research in their own right for a long time. Community organizations hold a wealth of experience and knowledge about their topic areas and the communities in which they work – knowledge that often is not outwardly available to us (as university researchers) through traditional channels.”



Volunteer packing food parcels for delivery at Foodhall
Credit: Mark Harvey (iD8 Photography)

Principles in Action

- » *C1 - Trust:* Build long-term, mutually respectful relationships with community partners; show up for each other to build trust, meet people, and see where things lead. Be an octopus: grow your tentacles.
- » *C2 - Learning Mindset:* Work with community partners, not for them; be humble and learn from partners as experts and innovators.

Long before a research project idea was formulated, I began to interact with Foodhall as a member of the community - attending and volunteering at community food events and dinners (building a long-term relationship). As I got to know the Foodhall community, as well as local urban farmers (through my research), this led me to the wider '[ShefFood](#)' community (Sheffield's food partnership network) and the even wider [National Food Service](#) (a network of UK community food projects working toward national food system change) - allowing me to 'grow my tentacles' and meet many more local food system actors, both within and outside the city. Meeting with these groups and attending various farming and food-related events was actually how I spent a large part of the first year of my PhD, before formulating any actual research questions.

As I began to participate in more community food events, this meant wearing two hats - that of a researcher, but also that of an active community member who wanted to see change in my local food system. For me, it was important that I first entered these spaces as a fellow advocate - meaning, I did not originally come to these spaces with a specific 'research question' or 'end goal' in mind, but as someone seeking to learn from those who had been long been doing this work in the community (the experts), and as someone passionate about participating in the city's food network and supporting the local vision. Even though I was at first an

'outsider' (not from the city or even the country), coming into spaces in this humanistic way helped to build trust, particularly with groups who may have been wary of working with university researchers.

Even though not all of these conversations or events ended up being relevant to the actual studies I would do in my PhD, becoming engaged in the food and farming community in this way gave me the foundation of understanding I needed to begin my research. This allowed me to focus my studies on collective issues that were of most interest to the communities I aimed to work with - and at the beginning, this did not actually include a study with Foodhall! Instead, my initial studies were focused on environmental impacts of local agriculture. However, I still maintained relationships with Foodhall and others in the ShefFood community by volunteering and continuing to 'show up' in these spaces over the course of my PhD, while keeping my ears open for ideas where I could beneficially engage as a researcher (seeing where things might lead). And when COVID hit, I was there to support Foodhall and my community by volunteering weekly in their emergency food parcel distribution program. By being an active member of the Foodhall community for many years, this helped to build trust and lay the foundation for research to come (although I didn't know it at the time). In fact, it would not be until the 3rd year of my PhD that I would actually begin a research project with Foodhall!

Through the conversations that I had with food parcel recipients when volunteering on Foodhall's helpline, as well as with Foodhall staff and volunteers, it soon became clear that many food parcel recipients were 'falling through the cracks' of other formal support options (reflecting how we listened to each other). Foodhall was particularly concerned about these individuals; many were ostensibly eligible for more formal support options (e.g., priority supermarket deliveries, government-delivered food parcels, and government financial aid), but were struggling to access these, often due to other mental and physical health issues. These individuals were largely isolated, and the very specific and complex problems they were facing were going unheard. Foodhall never intended to operate as an emergency food distribution system, and this community-based organization did not have the funding to sustain this operation over the long-term. It was clear that we needed to figure out why so many were struggling to access formal support and how best to support these individuals over the long-term, and then communicate that to other charities, city governments, and national governing entities. It was at this point that

Foodhall and I came up with the research project – a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 food parcel recipients - which aimed to center and uplift the voices of those most vulnerable in our community.

This project built on collective skills and resources from the ground-up, centering an asset-based approach. Foodhall's staff and volunteers could contribute deep knowledge about ongoing food and health related issues in Sheffield (because of the wellbeing programs they ran), the city's food policy and COVID programs, and insights from distributing food during COVID. I was able to contribute my research expertise to lead the interviews, time to dedicate to the interviews and to writing the reports, funding for interview transcription, and University tools and resources (e.g., the software used to code the transcripts). Additionally, since this research was conducted through Foodhall, a trusted organization with a long-standing reputation in Sheffield as a safe and inclusive space, participants were generally open to sharing their stories.

Building on our collective knowledge and strengths, I worked with Foodhall to co-develop an interview

transcript that would benefit our participants and Foodhall as an organization (supporting community goals), while also contributing to broader topics that were of interest to my general research (mutually beneficial). For example, some interview questions focused on areas that would help Foodhall and similar projects improve their delivery programs and better understand community needs, while others touched on the complicated intersections of food insecurity, mental health, and social networks. The methodologies used to analyze the interview were intentionally chosen in order to center the voices of our participants; while some qualitative methodologies aim to fit data into a pre-determined structure or set of themes, ours allowed for the main research themes and insights to inductively arise from the words and lived experiences of our participants – those facing food insecurity during COVID. This resulted in research products that exposed the cracks in government support structures and aimed to incite change to ensure that all could access healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food during this time.

Related Resources:

- [Best practices and principles for working with community groups, with a focus on indigenous communities: Transforming Research and Relationships through Collaborative Tribal-University Partnerships on Manoomin \(Wild Rice\)](#)
- [More info about this project: Community responses to food insecurity during COVID-19: A case study in Sheffield, England," Urban Food Systems Symposium](#)
- [Foodhall article about the need for food systems change during COVID: Covid has shown why we always need social architecture](#)
- [Another example of an academic who both volunteered and researched with a community food project: Cooking and eating together in London: Food sharing initiatives as collective spaces of encounter](#)