

“Just something that you could use to give your family a lovely warm dinner”.
Developing a social grocery store in Limerick - A feasibility study.

Mid-West Simon Community

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We very much appreciate the ongoing support of Adare Transport and Christ Church, who each week enable the food bank in Limerick to take place, as well as Pat Tiernan Motors and Tesco Ireland who both generously donated vans for the food bank. We also very much appreciate the Probation Services for their continued help with packing the donations.

We would also like to express our gratitude for the ongoing financial assistance that we receive from the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) whose generous support enables us to buy food for our service users, and the Department for Employment Affairs and Social Protection for their help administering the programme.

We would like to sincerely thank the faculty at the Department of Sociology, UL for taking on this research study and Limerick Regeneration Social Intervention Fund for providing funding for the project.

And last but by no means least, we would like to thank our staff and volunteers who continue to work hard to provide many supports across our services.

Foreword

Food poverty – which is defined as the inability to afford or access healthy food – reflects a form of social exclusion and social injustice. Good-quality affordable food, available and accessible to all, is a basic human right and necessitates political and community intervention beyond welfare provision.

Recognising the acute problems arising from food deprivation, Mid-West Simon Community has been providing food bank services throughout the Mid-West region since 2015. Over the past number of years we have made efforts to uncover the complexity of food poverty and the associated difficulties that people experience. We continue to strive to provide a needs based service, accessible to everyone in our community. Whilst operating our service, we treat our service users with dignity and respect at all times.

In Ireland, food poverty is well documented, and it is on the rise, with the current statistics showing that 10 per cent of the Irish population lives in food poverty (SafeFood 2019). Socially disadvantaged households consume less nutritionally-balanced diets and suffer from higher rates of diet-related chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity and certain cancers at a younger age. In our view, this situation may further deteriorate, if an appropriate action is not taken. For that reason, we have decided to conduct a study into the potential of developing a Social Grocery in the Mid-West region.

Through our continued involvement in the FEAD community throughout Europe, we understand the positives that can come from providing a service such as a Social Grocery. It provides people with choice, empowerment and an ownership. We believe that the findings presented in this report show undeniable evidence to the need for tackling food poverty and for developing a Social Grocery service. We intend to bring together community organisations and private partners across the region, share our knowledge and further develop services to support those most vulnerable in our society.



Jackie Bonfield
Mid-West Simon Community CEO

MID-WEST SIMON FOOD INTERVENTIONS

Since 2014 Mid-West Simon has supported its service users by offering a food bank service to individuals and families experiencing food poverty and / or those at risk of homelessness. With an aim to support and stretch out tight household budgets, based entirely on locally received donations, the first food bank was established in Limerick in 2014. Once this service became known about, the demand grew and led to the opening of two more food banks in County Clare in 2015.

Since 2016 Mid-West Simon has been funded by the EU FEAD (Fund for EU aid to most deprived) Programme. Every month, through the FEAD Programme, Mid-West Simon Community receives an articulated lorry containing 24 pallets of non-perishable food. Adare Transport sponsors the ongoing pick-up from the Food Cloud distribution centre in Galway and its delivery to their warehouse, which is located on Ballysimon Road in Limerick.

Today, Mid-West Simon runs four food banks in Limerick, Ennis, Kilrush and Nenagh and provides support to their community partners (Tait House, St. Mary's, Probation and Linkage in Limerick Scheme, Irish Wheelchair Association and Limerick Youth Service). The FEAD programme continues to be the main provider of food, although it is worth mentioning that from time to time the food banks also receive donations from other local companies and individual donors.

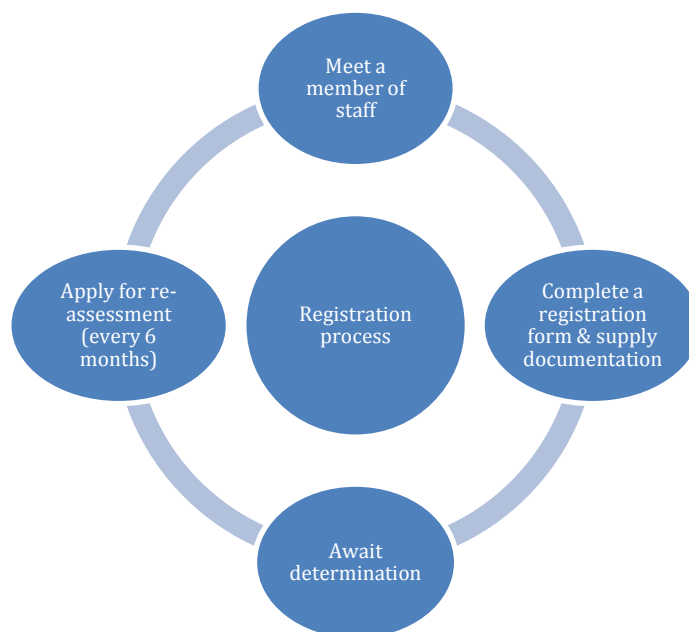
The cost of warehousing, storage and distribution is borne solely by Mid-West Simon Community and its generous benefactors. At present the food banks' operational costs stand at approximately €100,000 per year.

Mid-West Simon Community foodbank in Limerick

The foodbank in Limerick is currently operating from Christ Church in Glentworth Street. The foodbank opens every Friday from 10am to 1pm, and on average, it donates 100 individual and family packages on the day. In 2018, 4,261 individuals availed of the service; the number includes 2,130 children. The number of people in need of support has increased since then, with 4,654 individuals receiving aid in 2019.

The foodbank currently employs two part-time staff financed by Mid-West Simon Community, one staff member financed through a community employment scheme, and five volunteers who help out in the food bank during its opening hours.

In order to register with the foodbank, an applicant has to meet with a member of the Mid-West Simon team and complete a short registration form. Completed forms must be accompanied by a photo I.D., proof of address and proof of income (where available). Potential clients are assessed in accordance with Mid-West Simon values of Acceptance, Dignity and Respect.



Locally, food supports in Limerick are also provided by such organisations as Saint Vincent de Paul, the Redemptorist Church, and through the Novas’ Street Outreach Service.

STUDY MOTIVATIONS & METHODOLOGY

Food poverty adversely affects individuals’ diet, physical and mental health, and their ability to fully participate in everyday social and cultural practices. Safefood (2019) research evidences that, in 2018, one in ten households in Ireland experienced food poverty. The research, confirmed that healthy diet is often the first casualty when low income families struggle to meet all their household budget demands. The impetus for this study was to gain knowledge and understanding of the experiences of food poverty in Limerick from the perspective of the users of a food bank.

According to the data compiled by Mid-West Simon Community, between January and March 2019, 3,518 people availed of their food bank service in Limerick, of whom 1,756 were children. The numbers reflect the reality for many men, women and children who suffer food deprivation and for whom food aid is a necessity. According to World Food Summit (1996, point 1.3) “hunger is not just a manifestation of poverty, it perpetuates poverty”. Thus, Mid-West Simon Community has committed itself to addressing the issue of food insecurity amongst service users at their food bank in Limerick City.

The purpose of this research project was to assess the level of interest amongst Mid-West Simon Community’s food bank service users’ in the establishment of a social grocery store in Limerick. The function of social grocery stores is to offer a wide range of food products (such as vegetables, meat, fish, cheese etc.) at reduced prices, in addition to those products that are already offered,

free of charge, through the existing food bank. The research aimed to, first of all, map out the characteristics of those experiencing food deprivation in Limerick, and secondly, to explore and understand the subjective realities of men and women who are food bank service users; their food and dietary needs; and their grocery shopping requirements. The end goal of this project is to explore whether Mid-West Simon Community should expand their food support service, and to map out a model for sustained food interventions that can be replicated across Ireland and abroad.

The project received ethical approval from UL's Arts Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee (reference: 2019-12-06-AHSS). Recruitment of participants and the data collection process took place in Limerick on four consecutive Fridays during the food bank hours. The project used a mixed methods approach (combining a survey and interviews) and was divided into two phases:

Phase 1 – Survey

The aim was to obtain descriptive statistical information about the people who use the food bank service in Limerick and to gain a better understanding of the overall characteristics of this population. 131 registered service users volunteered and took part in the survey which was a strong uptake.

Phase 2 – Face-to-face interviews

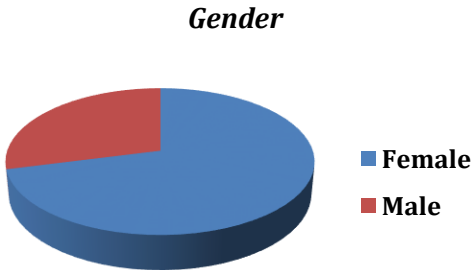
Twenty-nine interviews were conducted with volunteer service users of the food bank. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A systematic analysis of the interviews enabled us to uncover individuals' experiences of not only being a food bank user, but also their experiences of food deprivation, insecurity and poverty in Limerick.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Survey

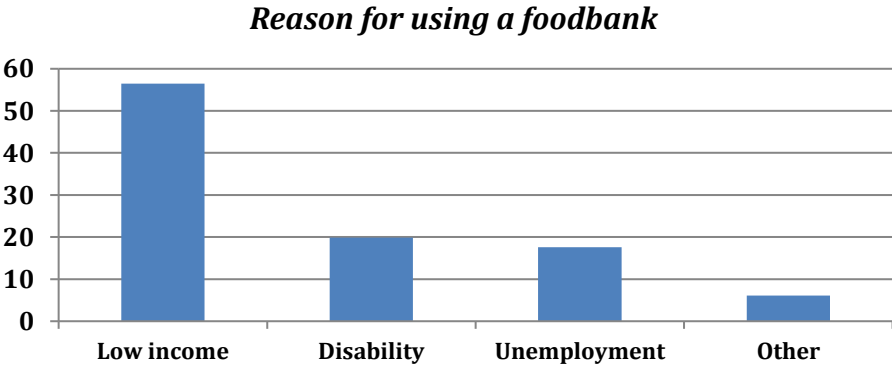
131 food bank users took part in our survey, 71% were female and 29% male. 63% of the participants were over the age of 36, 17.6% were over 56 years of age and 17.1% were between ages of 18 to 35.

The majority of participants were Irish (77.1%), with 17.6% from non-EU countries and 5.3% from the EU.



27.5% of survey participants were food bank users for over four years. The majority (61.8%) have used the service for somewhere between a few months and over a year. 10.7% were new service users, who received the support of the food bank for few weeks.

The majority of survey respondents reported the need to avail of food support due to low income. For a significant proportion the need to use the food bank arose due to disability and unemployment.



Other reasons reported by the participants were: pension, high rent, social welfare being refused or cut down, sickness, and caring for a family member.

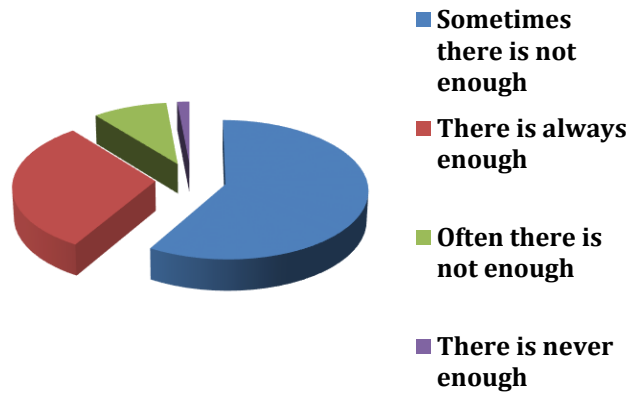
80.1% of participants reported that they have children. In terms of participants' household composition and shopping requirements, the research showed that 51.9% of survey respondents shopped for 2 to 4 family members, 32% shopped for 5 or more family members, and 16 % were single households. For 70.2% of participants, the most decisive factor influencing their purchasing decisions was the price of the food, followed by the quality of the products (16%), habits (6.9%), dietary information (4.6%) and the look and feel of the products (1.5%).

58% of participants reported periodically experiencing lack of sufficient access to food, with 9.2% reporting frequently not having access to enough food and 1.6% reporting never having enough food.

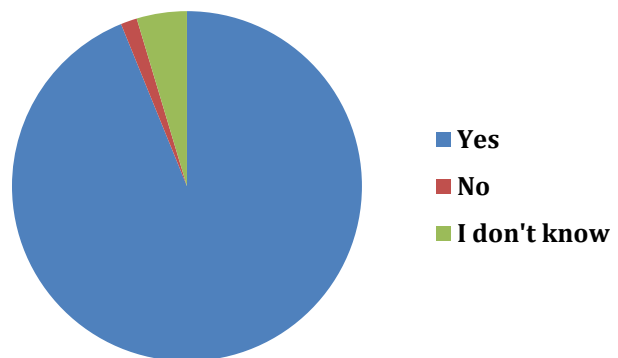
47.3% of participants admitted that their diet could be healthier, with as many as 44.3% considering their diet as healthy and nutritious.

Asked if they would shop in a social grocery store, 93.1% (122 participants) answered positively and were enthusiastic at the prospect of shopping there.

Availability of food



Shopping in a social grocery store



Interviews

Twenty-nine food bank service users volunteered to be interviewed (22 women and 7 men). That is reflective of the survey findings, showing that the majority of the food bank service users are females. At the time of the interviews, our participants reported that they were financially responsible for a combined total of sixty-two children. Three of the participants reported being financially responsible for as many as five children.

The youngest interviewee was twenty-seven years of age, while the eldest was sixty-nine years old. The majority of participants (15) were aged between forty and sixty years old. Most participants (20) were Irish, two were originally from the EU and seven came from non-EU countries.

Analysis of the participants' employment status showed that the majority were unable to work due to disability, either their own (10 participants) or their family member (5). Seven interviewees reported that they were registered with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and searching for jobs. Four participants were employed either full-time (1), part-time (1) or through community employment programmes (2). Finally, two interviewees were pensioners and one was a stay-home parent.

Several interviewees were service users for as long as five years, for others it was their second time coming to the food bank. All interview participants reported struggling financially due to their income / weekly welfare allowance / pension being disproportionate to the high costs of living. The interviewees provided a variety of reasons for why they avail of the service, such as:

- Going hungry
- Not being able to feed children
- Desperation
- High cost of rent
- High cost of medication
- High cost of food
- Bills
- Debt

Two participants also reported isolation and lack of transport from the remote location of their homes as barriers in availing of low cost / promotional offers on food.

All interviewees expressed their interest in shopping in a social grocery store. In their view, having access to bigger range of foods for discounted prices would have a positive effect, not only regarding the quality & quantity of accessible food and the freedom to choose what they eat, but also their overall budgets. The majority indicated that if they were in a position to save money on food, they would be able to buy clothes or take children for holidays or simply to catch up with

their bills. Others were relieved at the prospect, stating that they would be able to do a weekly shopping and wouldn't have to avail of a soup kitchen.

The above findings show the importance of food interventions. Despite few participants recording the initial feelings of embarrassment or guilt for receiving charity, our participants unanimously described their gratefulness, appreciation and relief for receiving food relief. Apart from one person who is a new service user and who reported feeling unassertive, there was a sense of acceptance among all others, they disclosed that receiving help is not a matter of choice but rather a necessity. Therefore, all reported being happy to stand in the queue every fortnight to receive their bag of food items.

Asked about grocery products that they wish they could access / access more frequently, participants named basic groceries needed for preparing daily meals, such as:

- Meat & condiments
- Fish
- Rice
- Potatoes
- Bread
- Fruit
- Vegetables
- Sugar

All reported limited ability to purchase the above products. Two reported intermittent inability to have dinner. Numerous mothers in the research highlighted the difficulty of putting together school lunches for their children.

The following stories highlight the fact that even though people receive food relief from a food bank, their food needs are not fully met and they continue experiencing food poverty. Considering that the majority of our participants have children, our interview findings reflect lived experiences of ninety-one people. Those findings show evidence of food poverty in a variety of forms, having a variety of causes. What all our participants have in common is that their existence is precarious, deprived and full of constant worry.

I first registered with the food bank six months ago because of the rising cost of rent. My partner suffers from a severe mental health disease as well. She is in crisis for a while now, so my back is against the wall. I love my wife but the psychological side can be difficult for us to manage. So I'm doing most of the running around. I'm trying to be a man in the relationship. I can't work because of disability. It's the same with my partner. One of her payments is gone on rent alone. So two of us are trying to manage on one welfare payment.

To be honest, I was not able to put food on the table. But look, when you are hungry enough and you are struggling from week to week and day to day, you have to put food on the table. There is days you go without meals you know, the main meals. But you have the basics from the food bank, you have tea, you have soups. But I'm talking about solid meals. We don't have access to enough food. We can't afford to eat proper meals every day. What we get from the food bank is more less just basic, dry food, which we are glad to have, don't get me wrong. I'm talking about cereals, porridge which we often eat at night to get by. There are times when you'd go to St Vincent de Paul but sometimes it takes 5 or 6 weeks by the time they get back to you but I do understand they are busy. It is embarrassing to do that but sure we got in there for Christmas. We didn't even get each other presents for Christmas this year trying to put things together for the Christmas period. But now it's a relief that Christmas is over.

But I have no shame coming here to the food bank. I'm gone past the stage now where I would have given up. I won't give up. I'm the one who has to get out there and make things happen because if I won't, my partner is not able.

If I had access to a social grocery store, of course I would shop there. Well first of all, we would be able to do a proper shop each week and not to be running around to soup kitchens and the street outreach van to get a snack in the evening. It is embarrassing going to these places. People see you going there, out on the street and it's sort of shameful if any of the family members see you. So it's not easy.

David, 52

For the last 15 years, me and my husband, we were both working but last year he got sick. He got cancer, so he is not working and I mind him at home. I had to quit my job as well. I registered with the food bank 4 months ago because I need some extra food. When I first came here it was great. I was very excited because I didn't know what you get in the bag, it was like Christmas, like a present. So obviously I was very happy. Without it, it would be very difficult because sometimes I spend extra on my husband's supplements and painkillers. So sometimes we really, we have only €10 until next payment. So that jar of pasta sauce sometimes saves our life.

We don't have enough food. At times when there's very little, I try not to eat too much. I try my best to get more for my child and my husband. I have to make sure that my husband has all that he needs for his immune system. I have to make sure that he eats dinner and lunch. Same thing with my child, she is growing so she has to eat properly. So what do we do if there's not enough food? Sometimes we borrow from neighbours. We try you know, if you have €5 you have to go to Aldi or Tesco and try to buy just for €5 the most products that you can get, so you just calculate.

I would definitely be interested in social grocery. I would buy all that stuff you could use for lunch boxes for school or for dinners. It would be very helpful if the meat was there. It could be even readymade meals but just something that you could use to give your family a lovely warm dinner. If I could save on food then I could spend that money on bins or on extra clothes for my child or medication. I don't have the extra help like HAP, so most of my money goes to rent. What's left is really like €25 per week and I spend it on my family for food. Nobody said it will be easy.

Anne 36

This is my second time coming to the food bank. I had no choice. I had to leave work due to arthritis and so I'm on disability now. We can't afford to live on €335 a week. We can't afford our bills. We can't afford heating the house. We have to use the fireplace, we can't afford anything else. The stuff for the pain needs to be bought for me and other medication for my wife. We have to get on, but we don't have transport where we live. I have a pass but there are 2 buses where we live, there is only one in the morning and one at night. So I get a lift once a week.

It came to a point where we can't afford to buy food. We make a list and we buy only what's on that list and that's it. Nothing else goes into the basket, only that. Food bank is a big help to us, it's a huge help. I feel happy to be able to get help and I'm grateful for it. The bag I get down here is worth 30 euro a week. It is unreal. We struggle for the last 2 ½ years and I didn't know about the food bank at all, nobody told me. It's great. If we could save on food in a social grocery store it would really help us even more.

I will be getting my pension in few months and hopefully I'll get the home package as a pensioner, and will be able to pay for bits. I just have to wait and see. We will get a rise of €41.80 a week. That's a lot of money to us.

Keith, 65

I am a carer for wife and daughter. A year and a half ago we were kind of struggling. The money was disappearing and we needed help. We didn't have enough food, so I registered with the food bank. It was hard at first because I was saying - there is more people, there is people out there who need it more than I do. Then I realised I had nothing in the press you know, there was nothing there, so I just had to do it. I worked from when I was 15 years of age and then the things started to get bad and I just kept saying - no, there is more people out there that need it more than us. But it's fantastic, if that wasn't there I don't know what would we do. You'd be lost without it.

Food can still be a bit of a struggle. Like myself and my wife could do without it but we have to make sure that kids have something. We wouldn't spend much, we only go day by day. We can't actually afford to do a big shop, and so what we get from the food bank helps us out then.

Of course I would shop in a social grocery store. I would buy fruit and veg and basic groceries. Saving money on food would mean everything. It would mean everything actually. We could pay off some of what we owe and we would still be getting fed.

John 57

I first registered with the food bank a year ago because it helps. My pension money only gives me x amount and now HAP is really nailing us, they are really getting out of hand. And the food bank gives me the basics. All I have to buy then is the refrigerated stuff. It really makes a big difference, providing the foundation, the stuff you keep in the press.

The Simon community have been absolutely fantastic. They've helped me so much, even putting in coal. There is no central heating in my house and there is only one stove and the cost of the electric, so I'm really limited.

Without Simon I would not have enough food and social grocery would be such a God send, it would make my life better. I could buy the stuff that's really expensive in the shop like cheese, butter and that kind of stuff, and if there is any kinds of meats, even cheap meats like chicken. I have some health issues. With that you have to eat only certain things you know, like crackers, things that are good to eat. Even bread, even loaf of bread a week, that's what €1.50 – €1.60, and when you only have €30 to deal with and that's all I got every week for food, that's difficult. Like this week I had to put €20 in my phone but I had to pay Mr Bin Man, so I paid him €27 for the month. I had to make a choice. So if they had reduced prices in a social grocery store that would make a big difference, that would really help.

Kate, 69

DEVELOPING A SOCIAL GROCERY STORE IN LIMERICK – 2020 CAMPAIGN

Through the provision of a social grocery, Mid-West Simon Community has an opportunity to, not only improve individuals’ accessibility to healthy food, but to offer them access to a holistic and empowering service. For that reason, the social grocery store proposed in Limerick will be based on a social enterprise model. Through a range of skills and training courses, money management workshops, advice and information services, and cooking and food skills classes, individuals will be provided with prospects to move towards self-sustainability and financial stability. The first of those steps is to offer the food bank users an opportunity to purchase grocery products of their choice.

OPERATIONAL MODEL

Member access

At least at the onset, it is envisaged that access to the ‘one stop shop’ social grocery will be restricted to individuals who are current food bank users, most likely on a weekly basis through a membership card.

Food suppliers

Food will be sought from:

- Supermarkets
- Food distributors
- Small food producers.

Location & Premises

The main objective is to find premises with:

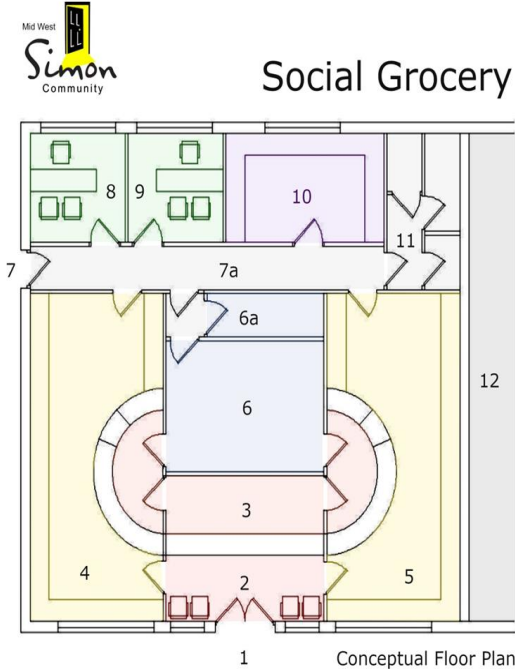
- Central location
- Privacy for service users
- Parking for service users
- Accessible for deliveries

Staff

Five staff members will be employed through a community employment scheme to work in the social grocery, as well as one manager who will be responsible for overseeing the operations.

Equipment required

- Fridges & freezers
- Scanners, tills & software
- Industrial shelving units & storage cages
- Pallet truck & forklift
- Cleaning equipment



- Legend:
- 1 Main entrance / access from street.
 - 2 Reception / control point with desk and seating area.
 - 3 Reception - Staff area.
 - 4 Social grocery store.
 - 5 FEAD distribution outlet / store.
 - 6 Goods storage.
 - 6a Refrigerated storage.
 - 7/7a Side entrance and circulation.
 - 8/9 Consultation / clinic rooms.
 - 10 Demonstration kitchen.
 - 11 Bathrooms.
 - 12 Neighbouring building.

Anticipated outcomes of Social Grocery

The introduction of Social Groceries in other jurisdictions have been found to result in a wide range of positive physical and mental health outcomes. These are in addition to the many other social and economic benefits that may accrue over time. Many Social Groceries offer prospective clients formal membership so that their status shifts from being ‘users’ to members, thus allowing for the cementing of a longer-term, supportive relationship with the service provider in question. This is essential as the poverty and exclusion experienced by many food bank users - as evidenced in the case-studies in this report - is often multi-factorial and may require a range of interventions by the service provider. Social Groceries, therefore, can work not only to offer greater consumption choices to members; serve as a ‘One Stop Shop’ in terms of the dissemination of information and advice but also as a source of community, belonging and resilience - often overlooked aspects of social exclusion.

Improving nutrition

A lack of choice is a strong feature of poverty and of food poverty in particular. Unlike food banks, for example, Social Groceries offer their users a broader range of dietary and nutrition options and may therefore contribute, not only to healthier eating, but also to an array of associated physical health benefits.

Reducing stigma associated with obtaining free & rationed food

Social Groceries can help remove the stigma and shame connected with having to attend and sometimes publicly queue at a food bank, food pantry or soup kitchen. By allowing its members to visit a specific premises and shop in a more ‘normal’ fashion, the stigma associated with receiving ‘free’ or rationed food, is replaced by affording members the possibility of making consumption choices according to their own tastes and dietary preferences by selling foodstuffs at a reduced rate.

Positive effects of engagement in supporting services

Some Social Groceries include a café which can serve as a social space for members. In addition to offering affordable meals and snacks, the provision of a café can help reduce social isolation. It can be used for cookery demonstrations as well as communal events such as food tasting sessions. A café can also work as a place in which the service provider can interact less formally with an individual member and allow for more positive engagement with the service provider. A further possible net effect of the provision of dietary and nutrition advice is an improvement in food literacy which can result in members making informed lifestyle choices.

Growing employability & economic benefits

As Social Enterprises, Social Groceries also have distinct economic benefits. The provision of foodstuffs at discounted prices allows for money to be saved and/or used on other essential goods and services. Members can be alerted to employment and/or training opportunities resulting in an increase in employability. Social Groceries can reduce food waste (see Schneider et al. 2015) and create employment and volunteering opportunities as arising from the day to day operation of the unit.

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUDING REMARKS

Food poverty in Ireland is well documented and currently 10 per cent of the population experiences food poverty (Safefood 2019). Good-quality affordable food, which is available and accessible to all, is a basic human right and demands intervention that is over and above State welfare provision. Since 2014 Mid-West Simon has offered a food bank service to individuals and families experiencing food poverty.

This research found that of the 131 food bank users completing our survey, 71% were female and 29% male. The majority availed of food support due to low income, with 61.8% having used the service for between a few months and a year. However, it is noteworthy that 27.5% of our survey participants were food bank users for over four years, reflecting an understanding that even though people receive food relief from the food bank, their food needs are not being fully met and they continue to experience food poverty. 58% of our participants reported periodically experiencing lack of sufficient access to food, with almost 12% reporting either frequently not or never having access to enough food. The research showed that 51.9% of survey respondents shopped for 2 to 4 family members, 32% shopped for 5 or more family members, and 16 % were single households. For 70.2% of participants, the most decisive factor influencing their purchasing decisions was the price of the products. When asked if they would shop in a social grocery store, 93.1% (122 participants) answered positively. They saw the provision of such a service as having a positive effect, not only regarding the quality & quantity of accessible food and the freedom to choose what they eat, but also their overall budgets. The majority indicated that if they were in a position to save money on food, they would be able to buy clothes or take children for holidays or simply to catch up with their bills. The introduction of Social Groceries in other jurisdictions have resulted in a wide range of positive physical and mental health outcomes, in addition to many social and economic benefits that accrue over time. Social Groceries can help remove the stigma and shame connected with having to attend and sometimes publicly queue at a food bank, food pantry or soup kitchen.

As a consequence of this research we make the following recommendations.

- Through the provision of a social grocery, Mid-West Simon Community has an opportunity to, not only improve individuals' accessibility to healthy food, but to offer them access to a holistic and empowering service.
- The Social Grocery should aim to include a café facility which can serve as a social space for members, helping to reduce social isolation. The café facility can also work as a place

where the service provider can interact less formally with the members and allow for more positive engagement with the service provider.

- The social grocery should aim to provide the following products:
 - Meat & condiments
 - Fish
 - Rice
 - Potatoes
 - Bread
 - Pasta
 - Porridge & Cereals
 - Fruit & Vegetables
 - Beans
 - Dairy products: Milk, Yoghurts, Butter, Cheese
 - Eggs
 - Sauces
 - Tea & coffee
 - Snacks
 - Sugar