



Food Security Needs Assessment

Food Security 2020 and Beyond – Summary Document

Food security “When all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. Committee on World Food Security

Why we did this work?

- ✓ To understand the lived experience of Tasmanians vulnerable to food insecurity.
- ✓ To amplify the voices and learnings from this project to inform future food security work.
- ✓ To acknowledge that stories of lived experience can provide a deeper understanding of the complexities of food security.

The project provided an opportunity to understand the response to the COVID-19 social and economic support packages rolled out at the start of the pandemic by all levels of government. It aimed to understand the contribution of prior investment by the Tasmanian Government in community food programs and food security initiatives.

How was this work done?

We connected with partners across government and community to support people vulnerable to food insecurity to tell their stories.

Data was collected via:

- an online questionnaire using Survey Monkey
- in-person focus groups
- one-on-one interviews

We brought together sector leaders to help us understand the stories and survey findings. Together, we considered next steps including how we communicate what we heard to community members and key change makers in policy and funding.

For full report email community.nutrition@health.tas.gov.au

A sample of what we heard

Theme 1 - The most vulnerable were affected inequitably

Complicated processes, systems and slow responses had deeper impacts on those who could least afford it. Accessing food relief also became more difficult for people with limited social supports.

“The hardest thing during lockdown was to buy food for me, was, there is actually a couple of things my twins are ASD (autism spectrum disorder) and are quite fussy eaters. When the shelves were cleared I couldn’t get what they ate so that was frustrating. But being a single mum trying to get to the shops to buy the food when you were not meant to take kids into the supermarket yeah was an absolute mission. Even trying to book order food online there was a wait on the delivery, trying to get a delivery spot was near impossible so I had to rely on other people to get stuff for me.

Focus group participant, North West Tasmania

Food security was an issue, people were also experiencing other challenges that intersected with and compounded the issue of food access. Issues discussed included but were not limited to housing, family violence, unemployment, mental health issues, disability, access to health services and social isolation.

“The problem for me wasn’t money, I was on JobSeeker and it increased so I suddenly felt less worried about everything. I could go around the supermarket and choose things I wanted rather than having to check my account and work out exactly what I needed to buy to cover the bare minimum to eat for the next week. I could save money for the first time in my life. But to be honest the biggest problem was housing. I just couldn’t find anywhere to live. It wasn’t about rent, I could afford rent. There were dozens of people applying for each place that came up. I slept on my mum’s couch for a while, which was pretty s%^& coz it’s not a great home to go back into” Focus group member, Southern Tasmania

It was noted systems were set up to meet the needs of organisations rather than individuals (e.g., to streamline or simplify internal processes) and it left them with impossible decisions – for example whether to attend a specialist medical appointment or to collect food relief.

“(Emergency food relief) only comes on Mondays. Well next week I have a doctor’s appointment, so I won’t be able to get over here. My chances are low” Interviewee, Northern Tasmania

Theme 2 - Choice around food and prioritising nutrition is valued

The increase in income support payments allowed people the autonomy to make healthier food choices. While the increase was in place it reduced stress around income for a period.

“When we started getting more money (job keeper and jobseeker) we bought more fruit and vegetables. Usually, we have to be super careful and buy only things that store well, but when we had more money we could buy things that you need to use more quickly, it was such a relief. We weren’t arguing about money, we were eating better. It was hard when the money stopped, we had to adjust back to what it was like before. I missed being able to choose the fresh stuff as easily.” Focus group member, Southern Tasmania

Access to cultural foods was identified as a particular challenge during the pandemic period. Access to familiar cultural foods is an important part of food security.

“Something I noticed was that cultural foods got harder to find. My community were finding it hard to cook foods that were familiar to them. I know that sounds pretty privileged compared to some of the

other problems we have talked about, but it's still an issue. ...I know people in my family that went hungry because they weren't able to find the foods that they need to cook meals they know." Focus group participant, Southern Tasmania

The value of local food access and local Tasmanian food was rated highly. Neighbourhood houses and community gardens were identified as places of connection, advice, and safe affordable food.

Infographic 1: Summary of online survey results on strategies Tasmanians used.



Infographic 2: Survey responses to how people help themselves or their community.



Theme 3 - People valued local connections to access and understand public health messages and food relief and to connect socially

Social connections played a role in both preventing critical crisis points and helping a person navigate or manage them (Infographic 2). Previous links such as connection to a neighbourhood house and education service helped. What occurred was a sense of community and people rallying together to help others - particularly those most vulnerable in their community. People described an appreciation of their own relative privilege: such as having more secure housing or having a volunteer job with community connection. Many shared stories of people around them who were 'doing it tougher', drawing comparison to their own situation. They described a willingness to help others out despite their own needs.

"I do collect for four other people as well and hand out to them as well. Having bags is good. Sometimes there is food I do not eat but I just put in the other bags they have families; they have kids they are struggling. Well, I think they need it more than me. So, they can have it. If there is a frozen meal, why throw it out when I can give it to other family. I deliver it straight away so it's food safe." Interviewee, Northern Tasmania

People described the ways that connecting with others and with community organisations had given them a sense of satisfaction and purpose in a time of stress and rapid change. By taking a role in looking after others, people found meaning and fulfilment.

"I had never been to this place before. We have lived here for decades just round the corner but I had never been here. Now I am here almost every day. It's my home."

Last year I couldn't work any more, our business closed down. I felt like – who am I? This place helped me. I'm here all the time, I do everything. I cook meals to be sold from the co-op next door.... Interviewee, Southern Tasmania

“Coming here and get support, it gets me out of the house. We have a chat they may give me cheek but that’s it. Always helpful for food I turn around and have a look - can I have this or more of that one. Choice is important for me. I am happy with what I can get here.” Interviewee, Northern Tasmania

Information and support were more difficult to access and interpret for people who lived with disabilities, people for whom English was not a first language and those with reduced digital access.

In some communities there was a notable increase in people reaching out for the first time and a reliance more heavily on their local community for food and social supports.

“We are seeing a lot more people than before, that no way they would come and get help cos “I can do this” now they are realising can’t really but no judgment here so they will go and get some help.” Community Volunteer and community member, Northern Tasmania

What is important to the community?

✓Income support and the food relief system continue to be important safety nets

Participants recognised the increased autonomy people had during the period of increased basic income support payments. They described the importance of those payments to give them the ability to purchase more fresh fruit and vegetables and make healthier food choices for themselves and those they lived with.

“It shouldn’t take a pandemic for us to give people enough money to buy fresh fruit and vegetables, they deserve dignity.” Focus group member, Southern Tasmania

It was noted additional income payments were not equitable across categories with recipients of aged or disability receiving only one-off supplement payments.

✓Elevate voices of lived experience

The pandemic highlighted the small margin between household security (food, housing, debt, utilities, safety) and poverty and the impact on mental health and family stability.

The involvement of interested parties in the data analysis phase has created an opportunity for community sector leaders to listen and reflect. This will enable a shared understanding of the data and help to facilitate a collective responsibility to act on what was heard.

There is a whole of government responsibility to work with community to understand the stories told and use what is heard, to act. This is recognised in many documents including the [Healthy Tasmania Five Year Strategic Plan 2022-26](#), the [Tasmania Statement](#), and the [Long Term Plan for HealthCare in Tasmania 2040](#).

✓Meet nutritional and food needs with dignity and equity for better health

Offering leftover food or unused food, often of lower nutritional value from a poorly operating food system, can impact on the dignity of people accessing food.

Community organisations who provide food relief operate on limited days, what is on offer can vary greatly, and food is often seasonally dependent. The survey data (Infographic 1) revealed several ways in which food insecurity was having a flow-on effect to eating behaviours. Meal skipping, limiting food variety and reducing meal size were all examples of behaviours used to manage food insecurity. These

behaviours can be exacerbated by an unreliable and inequitable food relief system. Strategies to “manage with what you have” impacts on both short and long term health and wellbeing, for example disordered eating, management of chronic disease and mental health.

Food relief must meet the nutritional, cultural and social needs of Tasmanians in need. [The Food Relief to Resilience: Tasmanian Food Security Strategy 2021-24](#) notes that food insecurity is rarely an emergency; it is much more likely to be chronic over a longer period for many Tasmanians.

Pre-pandemic there were a variety of food relief models operating within the Tasmanian community. These ranged from ‘pop up’ initiatives offering food to those in need, to more established walk-in food relief providers. Food relief is provided in many ways, including food vouchers, hampers, ready-to-eat meals, community ‘dine in meals’, social enterprises providing hospitality training and affordable produce and meals to purchase, community gardens and agricultural programs. However, these programs are not equally available across the state.

Previous work has showed the value of community food programs which build capacity through food knowledge and skills, pathways to further education and employment, social connections and improved access to healthy foods. Food relief options provide an important safety net but food security initiatives need to look more broadly to support local community food systems.

Community food programs go beyond meeting nutrition needs, they are valuable for social connection, enterprise and learning. Community based food programs create opportunities for mutual benefit when people can safely engage.

What is next

- The findings of this work demonstrate the need for a review of policies and funding that support the food relief sector and the Tasmanian food system.
- This work demonstrates the need for communities and individuals with lived experience of food insecurity to influence future policy and funding decisions.
- Collecting stories as standard practice in community consultation will facilitate a better understanding of need and how best to address this need in a co-design process.
- The Tasmanian Government has recently launched the *Food Relief to Food Resilience Action Plan 2023-25* which details how the Tasmanian Government, in partnership with the food relief and community services sector, will work together to support practical actions to facilitate moving from food relief to food resilience and working in partnership with the community to develop sustainable solutions that meet community need now and into the future.
- Public Health Services is working with lead agency the Department of Premier and Cabinet to progress actions around food security and food resilient communities under this Action Plan, the [Tasmanian Food Security Strategy 2021-2024](#) and the [Healthy Tasmania Five-Year Strategic Plan 2022-26](#).



Department of **Health**
GPO Box 125
HOBART TAS 7001

1300 135 513

www.health.tas.gov.au