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# Fun, Food, Folk: The Centrestage approach to dignified food provision

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Research Summary

See the full report at:

[whatworkscotland.ac.uk/publications/centrestage-dignified-food-provision](http://whatworkscotland.ac.uk/publications/centrestage-dignified-food-provision)

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## Introduction

The need for food provision is growing in the UK and the shame and stigma of resorting to foodbanks are significant barriers to access for those needing support<sup>1</sup>. Solving food poverty and the causes of increased foodbank use may take time; meanwhile, there is a clear need for immediate innovations in the provision of services.

This Research Summary outlines key findings from research carried out on Centrestage's distinct food provision programme in some of the most deprived areas of North and East Ayrshire.

Centrestage is a charity, backed by the social enterprise Centrestage Music Theatre CIC, that uses food and the arts to engage people, help to improve their life chances and (re)build communities.

The Centrestage Catalyst Communities programme seeks to help people to access food and support, address underlying problems, build relationships and develop capacity for community action.

The research set out to understand how Centrestage achieves impact and draw lessons to inform policy and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Lambie-Mumford, H. (2013) 'Every Town Should Have One': Emergency Food Banking in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(1): 73-89. | Garthwaite, K. (2016) *Stigma, shame and 'people like us': an ethnographic study of foodbank use in the UK*. *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 24 (3): 277-289.

## The research

The research was focused on four areas, Fullarton and Pennyburn (Kilwinning) in North Ayrshire and Drongan and Rankinston in East Ayrshire, and the fixed food provision site in Ardeer, with fieldwork carried out between May and July 2016. The research questions covered three dimensions:

- How does Centrestage make a difference? (Values, practices, organisational culture and leadership).
- What difference does Centrestage make? (Immediate, intermediate and long term impact).
- What lessons can be drawn to inform policy and practice? (Scope for spread and sustainability).

An ethnographic approach was adopted involving 20 days of participant observation across the four areas of mobile food provision, as well as fixed provision in Ardeer and the industrial kitchen. In addition, 22 Centrestage staff and volunteers, seven of whom were also service users, were interviewed. By working alongside Centrestage and becoming immersed in the experience of the service, the data gathered helps to address complex questions about the why and how of ‘what works’ in dignified food provision.



*The Centrestage bus*



*Play area in the bus*

*“The central values are around care and compassion for people, fundamental... just the foundation of it all. Enabling people, helping people reach their potential, grow, nurturing, but a recognition that we’re all part of one community.”*

Centrestage manager 1

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## How does Centrestage make a difference?

**Our overarching conclusion is that Centrestage offers a distinct approach to food provision by creating a social environment as well as a dignified transaction. The study demonstrates the importance of social space and interaction when it comes to dignified food provision.**

Centrestage started in 2006 building on a core idea: that anyone can gain life-changing social benefits through active participation in the arts. Food provision was not part of the plan. However, through its recent outreach work in different areas, hunger was revealed and the dignified food provision programme therefore grew as a result of the organisation's commitment to fostering individual and community wellbeing.

In 42 weeks, Centrestage has distributed 140,440 food portions, exceeding the original projected number for the entire year (i.e. 40,000). This gives an actual Year One projection of 173,878 and provision has already been extended to further areas. The meals are prepared in a purpose-built kitchen with supplies from Fareshare and other donations, and distributed on a refurbished double-decker bus featuring a kitchen for demonstrations and areas for playing and socialising.

As illustrated throughout the report, social attitudes and pressures can make people put on a public performance, while hardship remains hidden and need goes unmet. Centrestage has developed what they refer to as a 'stealth approach', whereby the emphasis is on 'having fun', on reaching out to people as well as meeting need and, in a subtle but real way, this keeps their projects dignified.

There are key differences between what is offered by Centrestage and other food provision through structured voucher schemes in mainstream foodbanks. In particular, Centrestage frames food provision as a transaction between equal parties as part of an ongoing relationship characterised by reciprocity. It is an enjoyable, sociable, positive experience, and, as well as working with individual cases, it brings people together to address isolation and loneliness by building or re-building communities. Those who benefit are given the opportunity to give a donation and this 'pay it forward' approach helps to retain dignity, foster solidarity and contribute to sustainability. Centrestage teaches people to cook high quality meals, and offers pathways into volunteering, tickets to its shows also on a 'pay it forward' basis and connections to support. This creates aspirations and broadens horizons.

Our research found a strong organisational culture that permeates every aspect of Centrestage operations. This could be summarised as a relentless ethic of care and compassion; radical inclusiveness i.e. approaching everyone with 'unconditional positive

regard'<sup>2</sup>; strengths-based so that everyone is encouraged to identify their strengths; and constantly working to create a motivating and happy atmosphere.

We have also noted key components of the Centrestage modus operandi, namely the ability to be flexible and adaptable to the environment, continuously learning and improving through ongoing reflection, and being creative and imaginative in its problem-solving. As argued in the report, this amounts to a form of creative pragmatism that allows Centrestage to be resourceful despite lacking resources. This underpins the organisation's knack for meaningful transformations – e.g. supplies into meals, artefacts into spaces, services into relationships.

In terms of structure, the organisation is being increasingly flattened to promote a form of 'facilitative leadership' distributed across all levels, prioritising autonomy and collaboration over command-and-control<sup>3</sup>. Senior staff are seen as inspirational role models who provide guidance and support, while encouraging workers to take on leadership roles and act on ideas.

The way Centrestage recruits more closely resembles the development of a local movement galvanised around common purpose than the standard hiring practices of a conventional service. All in all, what we found is a strongly value-laden organisation nurtured by value-based practice and acting as a catalyst for a growing community of purpose.

*"I think Centrestage really realises that people are struggling and people don't want to feel that they're on charity, that they're begging for something, especially people that are working, if they're on low incomes. Do you know what I mean? Because we're brought up in Scotland to, you stand on your own two feet and you do things for yourself ... and it's trying to break that barrier."*

Centrestage volunteer 2

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<sup>2</sup> Rogers, C. (1959). A theory of therapy, personality and interpersonal relationships as developed in the client-centered framework. In (ed.) S. Koch, *Psychology: A study of a science. Vol. 3: Formulations of the person and the social context*. New York: McGraw Hill. pp. 184-246.

<sup>3</sup> Escobar, O. (2014) *Strengthening local democracy in Scotland: The Community Councils' perspective*. Edinburgh: COSLA Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy. Pg 21.

## What difference does Centrestage make?

The report explores individual and collective outcomes over the short, medium and long term, documenting stories around core themes, including:

- Alleviating hunger
- Fostering human contact
- Helping to break down barriers in taking steps towards help
- Providing something to look forward to and thus addressing leisure poverty
- Challenging individual and social perceptions and assumptions that lead to stigma
- Transforming the immediate area by creating a vibrant and supportive community space
- Addressing underlying problems, talking through issues and offering or signposting support
- Building ongoing relationships that generate knowledge to inform effective action
- Enabling direct changes in physical and mental wellbeing
- Creating unique experiences, building aspirations and providing opportunities to broaden personal and collective horizons
- Supporting families
- Building or helping to re-build communities, establishing or reaffirming a positive local identity
- Brokering connections and developing social capital within and beyond the local area
- Fostering community empowerment by supporting local people to set their own priorities and develop local services.



## Spreading and sustaining the Centrestage approach

Scaling-up usually means ‘delivering or enacting an innovation in a way that increases the number of people benefitting from it while ensuring the original design’ is maintained<sup>4</sup>.

When thinking about spreading and sustaining the Centrestage approach, the organisation faces a number of challenges.

**Firstly**, despite Centrestage’s success, the team is aware that there remain people who have still not been reached and that this will require further development and creativity.

**Secondly**, there is room for improvement in getting other local organisations and services on board. **Thirdly**, there are challenges regarding the very process of food provision. Namely, keeping pace to meet growing demand; maintaining the infrastructure (i.e. the bus); legal hurdles; and managing scarce supplies.

**Fourthly**, the organisation faces internal challenges, which are currently being addressed. For example, staff are improving communication between the kitchen and frontline staff through shadowing opportunities. In order to minimise the potential for ‘burn out’, Centrestage has implemented a strategy and set up a ‘circle of support’ so that workers and management help one another to reflect on boundaries, understand and deal with limitations, and be self-aware about their physical and psychological wellbeing. Centrestage is also looking at its revenue to assign more staff to the project and recruit more volunteers. **Finally**, the failings of other services have sometimes become apparent and forging collaborations while remaining a critical partner is challenging.

The report also highlights key enablers that provide the foundation for the spread and sustainability of the Centrestage approach. For example, the strong organisational culture bound by common purpose; continuous peer-learning and adaptability to different contexts; creative pragmatism and resourcefulness; and ongoing collaboration with other organisations. Finally, their model of facilitative leadership has been shown to be crucial in spreading and sustaining innovation in other contexts<sup>5</sup>.

All in all, the starkest challenge is the growing need for the service, which stretches Centrestage’s capacity. The usefulness of the surplus food obtained from Fareshare is reduced at times, and Centrestage has to cope with unpredictability and fund fresh supplies. The ‘pay it forward’ model, however, offers some encouraging signs in terms of contributing to sustainability (e.g. £22,190 in the first nine months). The organisation is also currently seeking collaboration with local suppliers. Nonetheless, these contributions may not be able to fill the gap to meet growing need. Outside help, wider connections and support are required.

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<sup>4</sup> Shiell-Davis, K., Wright, A. Seditas, K. Morton, S Bland, N. (2015) *Scaling-up Innovations*. Edinburgh and Glasgow: What Works Scotland. Pg 5.

<sup>5</sup> Shiell-Davis et al. 2015. Pg 1.

## Conclusions: lessons for policy and practice

Centrestage is a relevant exemplar in the context of current debates about social justice, community empowerment and public service reform in Scotland. The Centrestage dignified food provision programme operates 'downstream', dealing with the consequences rather than the causes of inequality, and until preventative 'upstream' interventions come to fruition this downstream work remains necessary.

The 2011 Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services established four principles for effective and sustainable services. Namely, to empower individuals and communities receiving public services by involving them in the design and delivery. Secondly, that public service providers work more closely in partnership, to integrate service provision and thus improve outcomes. Thirdly, to prioritise expenditure on preventing negative outcomes from arising. Finally, that public services must become more efficient by reducing duplication and pooling resources wherever possible.

Public service reform is about more than the public sector, and the Centrestage case study illustrates how the third sector contributes to advancing the Christie agenda. Throughout the report we explore how it contributes to empowering individuals and communities to be part of their own service, involving them in the design and delivery. We also show examples of effective partnership where the organisation collaborates with other services. Despite being a 'downstream' approach to tackling food poverty and social exclusion, the research revealed how Centrestage's work can prevent further deterioration in people's wellbeing. In terms of performance, the report notes the organisation's ability to maximise scarce resources.

Centrestage is also playing an important local role in progressing the community empowerment agenda in the areas where it operates by:

- meeting basic needs to enable individuals to engage in community life
- developing people's confidence, self-belief, and agency, which are sine qua non to participation
- brokering local connections and solutions
- developing social capital and community capacity
- re-building community identity based on dignity, respect and solidarity.

A clear example of Centrestage's catalyst role is the Ardeer Hub, where community members are pursuing charitable status with a view to creating a social enterprise that will make their food provision self-sustaining, as well as develop other services. Centrestage views their exit from the local areas as the best indicator of success, and fostering the creation of new 'community anchor organisations'<sup>6</sup> is key to that strategy. This catalyst role is crucial, as there are clear disparities in the readiness of disadvantaged communities to

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<sup>6</sup> Henderson, J. (2015) *Community Anchors: Think Piece*. Edinburgh and Glasgow: What Works Scotland.

make the most of the new possibilities opened by the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act.

The lessons drawn out in this report invite reflection about the shifting role of the public sector in the context of developing a more ‘enabling state’<sup>7</sup>. Centrestage offers a distinct approach to some of the pressing challenges at the service frontline, and our conclusion is that they deserve a fair hearing unbridled by the hold of conventional policy thinking.

Mitigating the effects of ‘wicked’ social problems requires innovative emergency responses that may look and feel very different from standard services. Funders and policymakers face the challenge of finding ways of generating supportive and authorising environments where evidence-informed innovation can flourish.

We conclude with some lessons that may help to move in that direction:

- Importance of developing innovative ways of addressing unmet need. The cornerstone of Centrestage’s services is to create a social environment as well as a dignified transaction. We have illustrated some merits of Centrestage’s ‘stealth’ approach, but there is scope to gain a better understanding by studying similar examples in other contexts.
- Spreading and sustaining the work of organisations such as Centrestage requires ongoing support and collaboration across the third, public and private sectors –the scope for synergies is perhaps as great as some of the barriers to forging viable partnerships.
- Centrestage shows the importance of developing new forms of facilitative and distributed leadership capable of building strong organisational cultures that galvanise highly-motivated communities of purpose.
- It also exemplifies the power of ‘unconditional positive regard’ for making a difference to the lives of the most vulnerable in society. There is much work to be done to disrupt and eventually alter the status quo of assumptions and stigma around poverty and social exclusion – within and across communities, and in society at large.
- Funding and policy communities must combine a focus on both upstream and downstream action. There is much to be done at policy level to tackle and prevent the root causes of inequality. In the meantime, organisations such as Centrestage play a key role in attenuating the dire consequences for citizens and communities.

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<sup>7</sup> Wallace, J. (2013) *The rise of the enabling state: A review of policy and evidence across the UK and Ireland*. Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust.

## About the authors

Briege Nugent is an Independent Research Consultant and Criminologist with a decade of experience of carrying out research with those often referred to as ‘hard to reach’.

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## What Works Scotland

What Works Scotland aims to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

It works with community planning partnerships involved in the design and delivery of public services (in Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire) to learn what is and what isn't working in their local area and to encourage collaborative learning with a range of local authority, business, public sector and community partners.

What Works Scotland brings together the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, and other academics, with partners from a range of local authorities and national organisations across Scotland.

This is one of a series of papers published by What Works Scotland to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform. What Works Scotland is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Scottish Government.

See more at [whatworksscotland.ac.uk](http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk)

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<sup>8</sup> The group included Sir Harry Burns, University of Strathclyde; Christine Scullion, the Robertson Trust; Jim McCormick, Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Oliver Escobar, University of Edinburgh; Jackie McAllister, Rachael McKechnie and Matthew Linden from the Scottish Government; Jacqueline Lennon, West Coast Capital; Steven Marwick, Evaluation Support Scotland, Lynn Hendry, STV Appeal and the Hunter Foundation; and Fiona McKenzie and Paul Mathieson, Centrestage.

