

Briefing note on knowledge exchange workshop

Improving food and digital access for the Sudanese community in Birmingham

Held on 18 July 2026

Introduction

The aim of the workshop was to bring together members of the Sudanese community in Birmingham with members from the council and other service providers, to increase awareness of barriers faced by Sudanese in food and digital access, and to identify practical strategies to improve engagement.

Participants included researchers from SOAS (Susanne Jaspars and Yasmin Houamed), council staff working on food systems, a representative from the food justice network and women and men representing different Sudanese community groups, some who had lived in Birmingham for decades and some who had arrived more recently. The workshop also included two Sudanese facilitators and two translators.

In the first half, Yasmin presented findings from our UK research on the effects of digitalising food assistance, followed by facilitated discussion on barriers to engagement. In the second half, Susanne shared findings of the Sudan research highlighting the key role of the diaspora, again followed by discussion. This briefing note summarises the presentations followed by the key points that came up in discussion, based on specified discussion questions.

Summary of UK research findings

- Research in the UK focused on how digital welfare and food support systems shape access to assistance, particularly for marginalised communities. We drew on field research conducted with local authorities, community organisations, food and digital support providers in Birmingham, London (Newham and Barnet), Gateshead and Hartlepool.
- UK welfare and food assistance increasingly operates through digitalised systems, including Universal Credit, Aspen, Healthy Start, digital free school meals, supermarket voucher schemes, and food surplus redistribution platforms such as FareShare and Too Good To Go.
- Access to both government and charitable support often depends on having consistent access to devices, data, digital and literacy skills, and confidence using online systems. Many people rely on basic phones, shared numbers, public Wi-Fi, borrowed hotspots, or limited mobile data to manage benefit claims, food vouchers, and other essential services.

Social broadband tariffs exist but were frequently described as poorly publicised and still unaffordable for many households.

- Digital skills are highly context-specific: people may use WhatsApp, Facebook, or other social media confidently but still struggle with official portals, identity verification, online forms, and document uploads. Language barriers also create significant obstacles, as welfare and food-support websites are often text-heavy and difficult for non-native English speakers or people with lower literacy levels. Translation and form-filling support is frequently provided informally by friends, relatives, volunteers, or community organisations.
- People and organisations interviewed in the UK described the welfare system as creating anxiety about missing calls or messages, stress around verification procedures, and a feeling of being set up to fail when digital requirements could not easily be met. As a result, volunteer-led food banks, community groups and individuals often become substitute social infrastructure, helping people navigate both food insecurity and digital systems.
- The Sudanese community in Birmingham illustrates these dynamics clearly, Stigma, limited awareness of available support, and digital and language barriers reduce the use of formal food aid and welfare services. Community networks therefore play a crucial role in sharing information, translating, helping with online applications, and providing practical support.
- As support becomes increasingly digitalised, people without reliable connectivity, devices, language support, or the specific skills needed to navigate official systems face a heightened risk of exclusion from both state welfare and charitable food assistance.

Discussion on food and digital exclusion and options for addressing them

What do you know about available support for food and digital inclusion in Birmingham?

- Participants confirmed that awareness is one of the biggest barriers to support. Many said that people simply do not know what food, welfare, or digital support is available.
- They noted fewer centres or organisations are providing advice. Before Covid, Citizens Advice provided a lot more support.
- Information delivered mainly through websites was described as difficult to access because of text-heavy content, and people's limited confidence in English, low Arabic literacy for some, and many relied more on face-to-face communication.
- They felt that services currently rely too heavily on people asking for help, whereas proactive outreach through trusted community networks would reach more families.

Why are some Sudanese not using food banks or other food projects?

- Participants highlighted stigma and fear around food bank use. Sudanese families compare their situation with the humanitarian crisis in Sudan and therefore do not see themselves as "low income enough" to seek help. Asking for assistance could be viewed as shameful, including within the community itself.

- Fear of anti-migrant hostility and concerns about becoming visible to authorities discouraged some families from seeking support.
- Practical barriers such as transport costs, limited opening hours, and lack of information about eligibility further reduced access.
- Vouchers were generally seen as preferable to food parcels because they are more discreet and allow families to choose halal and culturally appropriate food.
- Different Sudanese groups have in the past organised food support for their communities in Birmingham but are now directing their efforts to supporting people in Sudan.

What kind of support have you given or received with online applications. What worked, and what didn't?

- Participants saw digital exclusion as a central issue linking welfare access and food insecurity. As in our research, participants found Universal Credit complex, stressful, and difficult to navigate. They struggled with online forms, inconsistent support from Jobcentre Plus,
- As a result, there was a dependence on friends, relatives, or community members to complete applications. One participant mentioned he received training in how to help others with digital applications, as an example of what worked. Concerns were raised about children being asked to help with benefit applications, exposing them to adult financial problems and responsibilities.
- Others mentioned the use of commercial centres for support with digital applications, which they felt were very expensive.
- The workshop also identified gendered inequalities in digital access. Newly arrived women were often dependent on husbands or other male relatives for Universal Credit, Healthy Start applications, and communication with official services. Participants emphasised that women need direct access to information, digital skills training, benefits advice, and financial support, particularly as family circumstances can change over time.

How could the council and other organisations better support food and digital assistance for the Sudanese community?

Several priorities were identified:

- Improve awareness through trusted local channels. Information about food, welfare, and digital support should be delivered through schools, health services, community organisations, mosques, and existing WhatsApp networks rather than relying primarily on websites.
 - Several participants said awareness raising works best when it comes from the community itself, and that this should be supported by the council. There should be concerted efforts to reduce shame around getting help.
 - Representatives from Sudanese groups can learn from specialised organisations and pass the information on to others within their communities.

- Invest in community-based infrastructure. There was strong support for walk-in community hubs specifically for the Sudanese community, offering integrated advice on food support, language learning, digital skills, and help with online applications, budgeting, and wellbeing. Participants emphasised that these services should be easy to access and developed in partnership with, or even managed by, Sudanese community organisations. Long-term funding is needed to reduce dependence on volunteers and short-term projects.
- Finally, policy should ensure culturally appropriate and dignified support and recognise the specific pressures facing refugee and diaspora households. This includes halal food provision, voucher-and cash-based support (with digital inclusion support if these are digital), independent access to information and financial support for women, and recognition that many refugee families experience simultaneous economic and emotional pressures in both the UK and Sudan, with important consequences for poverty, food insecurity, mental health, and social integration.

Summary of Sudan research findings

- Research in Sudan was guided by the same questions as in the UK, and led by Dr Tamer Abd Elkreem, from the University of Khartoum. We worked with researchers in North and South Darfur, Al-Gezira, Omdurman, Kassala.
- Sudanese themselves have been the main aid providers: fundraising through social media, transferring funds via the Bankak banking app, providing food through community kitchens (*Takiya*). We heard this from people and organisations in Sudan.
- International organisations also provide some forms of digitalised food assistance, often transferring money with Bankak as well. This includes: World Food Programme sending digital link for self-registration or transferring money to bank accounts (in north and east Sudan), international organisations providing electronic vouchers, or using new digital payment platforms like Cashi.
- But, large numbers of people are digitally excluded. Many have no smartphone, internet or digital skills, or ID documents or bank accounts. Some because they had no need before or because of mistrust of the state, others lost or had their ID docs stolen during the war. Even where banks exist (e.g. in Kassala), many do not have enough money to open an account.
- This means people are dependent on agents or merchants with smartphones and bank accounts, who can charge high fees for this service.
- Control over internet and telecoms has become a war strategy with the RSF shutting down services in February 2024 and introducing Starlink satellite dishes for internet services in the parts of the country they control. They charge for this and use it to monitor populations.
- A whole political economy has developed around digital financial transfers and connectivity, that includes not only warring parties but also regional actors like the UAE.

- All Sudanese individuals in the UK are hugely affected by the war, both emotionally, financially, and by demands on time. Those who have been in the UK for longer contribute to a range of projects in Sudan as well as supporting family and friends, through huge numbers of WhatsApp, Facebook and other groups. For recent arrivals this is more limited.

Discussion on effects of Sudanese diaspora aid and possibilities for support

How can Sudanese diaspora be better supported?

- Participants confirmed the huge effect that providing aid to Sudan has on their lives. They said: ‘It is continuous work’, ‘fundraising efforts are demanding’ and ‘we are exhausted by volunteering to raise and send funds and not getting paid.’ People in the group mentioned having to give up their job because of the demands of fundraising and providing support to Sudan. The main issue is not only the financial burden, but many find it difficult to make ends meet already, which creates psychological problems. People sacrifice their own needs to support those in Sudan. Sudanese groups have the confidence of people within their community to fundraise, but all have now exhausted their funds.
- Suggestions were made for better collaboration within the Sudanese community, working together on fundraising. Some groups used to provide support for new arrivals from Sudan, but then they became divided.
- They also called on the UK government to give assistance, both locally and nationally. Locally, at the level of the council, they would like more support with things that free up their time to do fundraising activities (for example after school clubs), to support Sudanese community groups with funds that will enable them to function as organisations, including grants for collaboration between groups, such as creating a community centre (or hub as discussed in the UK section).
- There is also a need to provide financial support for families in need. This could include things like universal free school meals and facilitating access to food banks and hubs (and cash grants to meet immediate needs or to support entrepreneurship).
- At local and national level, raising awareness of scams and digital fraud, including for Sudanese groups in the UK that provide aid to Sudan. Participants said almost every family knows someone who has been scammed, and that this is a major concern. People don't know which organisations they can trust. Some wondered whether funds raised always reaches the people it's supposed to.
- At national level, to support Sudanese in the UK, financial support for asylum seekers needs to be sufficient to live an active and healthy life, including access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, and for digital inclusion.
- At national level, the government needs to engage with diaspora organisations and to provide aid for people in need in Sudan through Sudanese diaspora organisations (as well as through local and international organisations). One priority is for the FCDO to tackle the money transfer agents in Sudan who take huge fees. Participants gave an example of sending 2 billion Sudanese pounds, but the agent asked for 35% as fees at the time of the

workshop. This could be solved if the Sudanese diaspora could set up accounts with the Bank of Khartoum in Sudan so they can transfer money directly, and to be able to register organisations in Sudan. Possible responses include for the UK government to link up small diaspora organisations with international organisations, and or for it to advocate for the Sudan government to facilitate the opening of bank accounts for Sudanese organisations outside of Sudan.

What message do we want to get across? (and to whom?).

- A key message is that the situation for Sudanese in the UK, as well as in Sudan, is serious. People are exhausted (from fundraising), financially depleted, and their own families are suffering. At the same time, there is no possibility of not aiding people in Sudan. For some people, the emotional toil has been so bad that they have divorced, become alcoholics, drug addicts, or committed suicide.
- Participants called on the government for support on a social level as well as financially (see above). One message should be to prioritise one's own wellbeing before helping others.
- From international organisations they want more transparency about what programmes they are implementing in Sudan and where (including numbers assisted). One suggestion was for representatives of Sudanese groups in the UK to be on the board of organisations working in Sudan.
- There is also a need to keep trying to get message about the Sudanese crisis to the media. Sudanese groups can work with their social media influencers and run an online campaign. Other options are to contact MPs, and parliamentary groups.