

TACKLING FOOD INSECURITY THROUGH DIFFERENT LOCAL MODELS OF SUPPORT

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This briefing is for stakeholders involved or interested in the provision of food at a local level. We draw out general findings on local level community food provision, highlighting examples from Bradford and Tower Hamlets where relevant.

Summary

Not just food banks

The food support sector is large, diverse and complex. It involves a wide range of organisations such as local authorities, charities, informal groups, education providers and faith groups. Communities have established a range of models including food banks, social supermarkets, community cafes, lunch clubs, community kitchens, co-ops, community gardens and soup kitchens. Some community food organisations (CFOs) provide food support to anyone, others target specific groups. Some CFOs apply eligibility criteria, and some operate via referral systems. A minority of organisations facilitate access to cash grants, in addition to giving out food.

Community food organisations take different approaches to addressing food insecurity

CFOs work in different ways to alleviate, reduce or prevent food insecurity and/or poverty more generally. Some focus on immediate food needs by providing free or low-cost food (what we term 'tertiary prevention'); some also tackle underlying issues by providing advice and advocacy on site or by signposting or referring people to other agencies ('secondary prevention'); and others seek to reduce food insecurity and poverty in the longer term through education, skills training or employment support ('primary prevention').

Challenges and uncertainties in the sector

The majority of CFOs are reliant on medium-/short-term funding, including funds provided from the Household Support Fund, which is scheduled to end on 30 September 2024. If it is not extended by the new government, many CFOs are at risk of having to stop or significantly reduce their provision if alternative funding is not available.

Many CFOs rely on surplus food distributed by charities or collected from supermarkets and local businesses, but this supply of food is unpredictable in terms of volume, frequency and quality.

Many CFOs question the logic of the food bank model, seeing it as inefficient, due to the resource-intensive nature of distributing food; its over-reliance on surplus food donations; and its inability to address the root causes of food insecurity. Some CFOs feel that a 'cash first' approach would be more efficient.

Recommendations for policy

Our findings make clear that community food organisations are not a long-term solution to food insecurity and poverty. However, food insecurity remains a significant and immediate societal challenge. Our recommendations therefore address both the immediate and long-term context.

Short term: How can we make the current system address food insecurity?

1. Coordinate efforts to tackle food insecurity:

- a. Community food organisations should work in partnership as part of wider anti-poverty and sustainable food partnerships. Partnerships should aim to i) develop a food insecurity strategy; ii) identify affordable and sustainable methods of procuring food; iii) establish/strengthen links with organisations which support families to prevent the need to access CFOs.
- b. Local authorities should consider a grant funding model giving priority to community food organisations that have a focus on strategies to prevent food insecurity, such as welfare rights advice.
- c. Funding decisions on whether and how to support CFOs should be done early and provide certainty about what will be provided to organisations to allow planning.
- d. Support constructive communication between CFOs and surplus food providers to ensure food meets the needs of CFOs and the people who use them.

2. Support CFOs to identify and address people's underlying needs and raise awareness of services:

- a. Support CFOs to provide welcoming, safe spaces where people can disclose wider support needs and ask for help.
- b. Help CFOs to coordinate better with other crisis provision to allow two-way links between them.
- c. Provide regular training and up-to-date resources to staff and volunteers to ensure they have sound knowledge of other relevant services and know how to signpost and/or refer people to them as appropriate.
- c. Make it clear exactly how to access food support, both for residents and for professionals. Consider ways to provide equitable access to services, such as raising awareness of services among populations most at risk and highlighting where they can receive support that is most appropriate for them.

Long term: How can we poverty-proof the system?

1. To overcome the complexities of the community food support sector, including the precarity of funding and over-reliance on unpredictable surplus food, donations and volunteers, local authorities should consider a cash first approach as piloted in other areas (e.g. Scotland at national level, Leeds at local authority level).
2. While more holistic models have longer term impacts, short term relief should not be removed from funding/support as it has a place within the community food support landscape, providing fast, no-strings-attached support to those in emergency need. Other models should also be explored, such as social supermarkets.
3. The new government should work towards alleviating food insecurity by reforming the social security system; this includes removing the two-child benefit cap, removing benefit sanctions, and reinstating the £20-a-week uplift to Universal Credit. It should also ensure employers pay a living wage and provide secure employment.

Background

One in five families with children in the UK live in a household where they cannot regularly access affordable and healthy food⁹. Food insecurity has increased significantly as a result of austerity policies since 2010, including the two-child benefit limit and the benefit cap; insecure employment; the expansion of the 'no recourse to public funds' rule; the Covid-19 pandemic; and the cost-of-living crisis^{10 11}.

9 [The Food Foundation. The Food Foundation. 2024 \[Accessed on 2024 Feb 29\]. Food insecurity tracking. Round 14 January 2024.](#)

10 [Francis-Devine, B. 2024. Food Banks in the UK. House of Commons Library.](#)

11 [Trussell Trust. 2023. Hunger in the UK.](#)

Food insecurity negatively affects physical and mental health^{9/10/11}. A wide range of community food organisations (CFOs) have been set up to provide support.

Research approach

Fair Food Futures UK, a research project funded by the National Institute for Health Research, aims to find out which community food models are most effective in reducing the need for support with food (e.g. food parcels), in two multicultural communities, one in the north and one in the south of England.

In order to build a detailed picture of the community food support system, we carried out a survey of 93 CFOs across Bradford (66) and Tower Hamlets (27) and facilitated two in-person systems mapping workshops in each location (total of 67 participants), including people accessing CFOs. We co-produced typologies and systems maps in online workshops with a further 22 stakeholders. We also interviewed key national and local stakeholders from 36 different organisations, 8 of which were based in Bradford, 14 in Tower Hamlets and 14 worked at a national level.

Finding 1: Not just food banks! The community food sector is large, diverse and complex

The community food sector at a local level is highly diverse in terms of organisation type, model, aims and approaches to prevention. There are also differences in how organisations manage access, how they work in partnership with others, and access to resources.

Organisations directly or indirectly involved in providing food support include local authorities, local and national charities, housing associations, community centres, sports and arts groups, education providers (nurseries, schools, higher education), and faith groups. National networks such as the Trussell Trust run several food banks in Bradford but none in Tower Hamlets. Many other Bradford-based CFOs are linked to Feeding Bradford and Keighley, the local arm of Feeding Britain, a national network aiming to end hunger in the UK.

The majority of CFOs started providing food support after 2010 in response to the effects of government austerity measures; a further significant minority were initiated in 2020-21 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Food insecurity has increased since 2010 in response to reforms to the social security system in combination with persistent low wages and high housing costs; it was further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and has increased sharply under the cost of living crisis, the impacts of which on household finances remain acute.

Food support encompasses a wide range of models, including food banks, pantries, social supermarkets, community cafes, lunch clubs, community kitchens, co-ops, community gardens, day centres and soup kitchens. In any community food organisation, food support may be the core activity and the reason why the organisation was established or may be one of a range of services provided in a multi-functional space, like a community centre, a children's centre or youth centre. Some organisations align the food they offer with the needs and preferences of the population they serve (in Bradford and Tower Hamlets these populations tend to be highly ethnically diverse), others do not. The vast majority include at least a small selection of fresh fruit and vegetables in their provision. Models vary in terms of how they operate, and services provided. For example, some pantries have a shop layout allowing residents to choose items, whilst others consist of pre-packed boxes of food.

A cash first approach to food insecurity, in which people are provided with food vouchers or cash grants or support to access these from other services, is an increasingly common feature of community food provision in the UK. In Bradford, some organisations attempt to alleviate pressure on household budgets by facilitating people's access to cash grants to cover essentials or by issuing fuel grants.

4 Stuff JE, Casey PH, Szeto KL, Gossett JM, Robbins JM, Simpson PM, et al. Household food insecurity is associated with adult health status. *J Nutr.* 2004 Sep;134(9):2330–5.

5 Tarasuk V, Cheng J, Gundersen C, de Oliveira C, Kurdyak P. The Relation between Food Insecurity and Mental Health Care Service Utilization in Ontario. *Can J Psychiatry.* 2018 Aug;63(8):557–69.

6 Holben DH. An Overview of Food Security and Its Measurement. *Nutr Today.* 2002 Jul-Aug;37(4):156–62.

One organisation, for example, helps users to access crowdfunded money to buy kitchen appliances, another completes applications to help recently arrived refugee families to get access to emergency money grants, from Zakat and Sadaqah donations⁹. Tower Hamlets Council, and at least one Tower Hamlets food bank, incorporate a 'cash first' approach¹⁰.

Community food organisations take different approaches to managing access; these vary significantly according to organisation type and area. Most are open access, meaning that anyone can turn up, whereas others are by referral only, meaning that only particular organisations/professionals (e.g. housing associations, GPs, teachers, social workers) can facilitate access. In Bradford, formal referral routes are mostly adopted by large food banks, where they are perceived as a necessary means of managing high levels of demand and prioritising people in greatest need (the decision is left to the professionals). There are limited examples of formal referral routes in Tower Hamlets. More often, people in need of food support are signposted or learn about community food organisations through word of mouth.

A minority of organisations target a particular demographic, such as asylum seekers and refugees, victims of domestic abuse, disabled people, people on welfare benefits, or people living in a certain area. Some organisations limit the number of times that people can access food support; others do not.

There is significant variation in organisations' size and their access to resources such as funding, physical space, storage, staffing, volunteers, opening hours and food supplies. Some organisations, for example, provide food support to hundreds of households every week; others reach fewer than 20 people per month.

People using CFOs acknowledged the size and variety of CFOs. In both Bradford and Tower Hamlets, some people were unclear on what was available, and when and how they could access help. Some described barriers to accessing services (e.g. transport, opening times, referral pathways, language). Some felt the quantity and the quality of food varied, and that not all CFOs included culturally appropriate items. In terms of experiences, 'queuing outside' and some types of food support (e.g. receiving only tinned food) were described as 'making you feel miserable'. 'Wandering around', 'having a choice', and finding 'fresh food' were described as positive normality ('like going to your local shop').

Finding 2: Community food organisations work in different ways to alleviate, reduce or prevent food insecurity

Food support organisations aim to alleviate, reduce or prevent food insecurity and/or poverty more generally. Almost all CFOs provide free or low-cost food to people who cannot afford sufficient (or nutritious) food. We call this 'tertiary prevention'. This form of support attempts to address the immediate food need but does not necessarily address the underlying drivers of that food need. Specific objectives may include: alleviating the pressure on household budgets; increasing access to fresh fruit and vegetables; providing cooking facilities for people who do not have them; teaching cooking skills.

Some food support organisations go beyond direct food support by addressing some of the underlying causes of household food insecurity. Staff or volunteers may ask people about any difficulties they are facing, or this information may emerge through informal conversations. Organisations may provide advice and advocacy on site (either directly or through co-located services) and/or signpost or refer people to specialised advice or support elsewhere (whether through a local authority-wide referral platform, e.g. THCAN in Tower Hamlets, or at an organisational level). Referrals may be made to voluntary sector organisations and/or agencies within the state welfare system. We call this 'secondary prevention'.

This approach is integral to the Trussell Trust model, for example. In Tower Hamlets, a large distributor of surplus food to CFOs prioritises partnerships with those which provide support beyond food, such as housing or income maximisation.

9 Zakat is a charitable donation, made once a year, obligatory for Muslims. Money collected with Zakat can only be given to people meeting eligibility criteria, one of which is being of Muslim faith. A second type of charitable donation, Sadaqah, is voluntary and can be given to anyone in need, including non-Muslims (see Islamic-relief.org.uk).

10 A 'cash first' approach is described by IFAN as 'responding to food insecurity by prioritising income-focused crisis support by means of cash payments, or vouchers if cash payments aren't available, and advice and support to maximise income'.

A small number of organisations seek to prevent food insecurity (and poverty more generally) in the longer term through education, skills training, volunteering development programmes or employment support. Some organisations take a community development approach, 'a long-term process which aims to address imbalances in power and bring about change founded on social justice, equality and inclusion'⁹ However, very few CFOs appeared to involve service users in governance and decision-making. Some campaign to change policy locally or nationally. These approaches are examples of 'primary prevention'.

Some CFOs are part of wider local and/or national food insecurity and anti-poverty related networks, others work in isolation. Some CFOs operate as franchises, sharing systems and tools to run food banks (HR, referrals, training); others are set up as networks (e.g. network of pantries offering access to saving opportunities); most, however, set up their own tools and systems. Some CFOs work as part of national networks to campaign and influence policies on a wider scale (e.g. to reform the benefit system).

Community food organisations take different approaches to collecting data and evaluating the impact of what they do. Variations may be due to the type of organisation, requirements of funders/suppliers, staff capacity or ethical reasons. Many CFOs collect basic information such as name, address and number of people in the household. Some ask people about their personal circumstances (in certain cases tracking this over time) and/or suggestions for how their services could be improved. Collecting and analysing such information can help identify and address people's needs, evaluate the impact of CFOs, and inform changes to service provision. CFOs try to balance the potential benefits of collecting and analysing individual- or household-level data with the risks of creating barriers to accessing food support.

Finding 3: Community food organisations face significant challenges

Community food organisations face a range of challenges, including: a) a reliance on medium-/short-term funding (including the Household Support Fund), b) a reliance on the redistribution of surplus food, c) selecting an appropriate prevention model, and d) balancing the volume of demand with the complexity of people's needs, limited resources and reliance on volunteers.

a) Reliance on medium-/short-term funding

The majority of CFOs are reliant on medium-/short-term funding to function, for example to pay for staffing, overheads and, in many cases, food supplies. In Bradford and Tower Hamlets, as is the case across the UK, the local authorities (and, indirectly, many CFOs) are dependent on the Household Support Fund (HSF), which comes from central government (Department of Work and Pensions). In Bradford, the HSF enables an estimated 20,000 residents to access free food parcels every month. In Tower Hamlets, until March 2024 the HSF-funded Food Hub distributed 23,160 kg of food to 80 CFOs every week (equivalent to 55,142 meals per week). The break in the HSF in March 2024 affected the Food Hub's distribution function, temporarily disrupting distribution of food to these CFOs. The HSF is scheduled to end in September 2024; if it is not extended by the new government, many CFOs are at risk of having to stop or significantly reduce their provision, if alternative funding is not available.

Community food organisations are also involved in other food-related government-funded schemes. Some organisations in Bradford and Tower Hamlets deliver the government-funded Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF) which is due to end in March 2025. This enables (some) children from eligible families to access meals during school holidays.

Some CFOs in Bradford and Tower Hamlets are funded to some extent by charitable grant funding. But this means that they have to compete with each other for funding. Some described formal or informal partnerships with local businesses, and/or access to Sadaqah and Zakat (money given as part of Islamic faith), as key assets. Some CFOs are also supported by corporate and individual donations.

9 <https://www.scdc.org.uk/who/what-is-community-development#:~:text=Community%20development%20is%20a%20process,on%20what's%20important%20to%20them.>

b) Reliance on redistribution of surplus food

Many CFOs rely on surplus food distributed by charities or collected from supermarkets and local businesses. These supplies are vital to stock food parcels and pantry shelves. Some CFOs reported that the amount of food received via these routes had decreased in recent years. This may be due to supermarkets displaying food for longer, and/or increased demand from a growing number of CFOs. Some CFOs were concerned about the quality of surplus food in relation to cultural appropriateness for local populations, food being perceived as out of date (e.g., rotten fruit), or items being unfamiliar or lacking in nutrition (e.g. tinned meals or sugary cereals), which people might be unlikely to want or use.

Some CFOs that relied on surplus food described challenges in providing food boxes which were nutritionally balanced and culturally appropriate, and which included fresh and/or 'useful' foods. CFOs that were keen to address this, and had sufficient resources, supplemented deliveries of surplus food by purchasing items from wholesalers or supermarkets, including fresh fruit and vegetables, rice, pasta, fresh meat, chapati flour or dried pulses.

c) Problems integral to the food bank and pantry model: ethical acceptability and sustainability

There are wider debates in the sector on both the practicality and the acceptability of the food bank model. Many CFOs questioned the logic of the food bank model, seeing it as inefficient due to the resource-intensive nature of distributing food, an over-reliance on volunteers and surplus food donations, along with the food bank model not actually addressing the root causes of poverty. Logistical challenges were also described around food distribution (e.g. transporting food between food hubs and CFOs). Running a CFO was described by some (although not all) as 'exhausting', 'deeply frustrating' or 'not integrated'. Some CFOs discussed potentially ending food provision once the Household Support Fund ends. Several organisations in Tower Hamlets had stopped providing a food bank since the pandemic. One organisation cited a need to focus on advice and advocacy to tackle people's underlying needs.

Some food bank coordinators in Tower Hamlets and Bradford wanted to move towards a food pantry model (i.e. where people pay a small amount for a certain number of items), or incorporate this into their existing model, as this was deemed more financially sustainable as well as promoting choice, dignity and autonomy. Some CFOs suggested that providing free food over the longer term risked contributing to creating dependency. It was also felt that the food bank model put pressure on staff and volunteers to make judgements about people's needs and 'deservingness', unless they used a referral system, where other agencies such as schools or housing associations were instead positioned as gatekeepers. However, some CFOs found the pantry model more complicated to implement due to logistical challenges.

d) Balancing volume of demand with complexity of needs

As well as facing challenges in managing demand for food support, many CFOs struggled to address people's underlying needs. Whilst there was recognition of the importance of working with people to address these often complex needs, some CFOs explained they were unable to do so due to lack of staff capacity and training, insufficient or unsuitable physical space, and/or limited knowledge of other types of support available. Many CFOs were reliant on volunteers (including one-off corporate volunteers in Tower Hamlets) which also had implications for providing appropriate support to people accessing CFOs.

Conclusion

Our research highlighted the scale and diversity of the sector; different ways to alleviate, reduce or prevent food insecurity; and challenges and uncertainties in the sector.

Our recommendations offer short-term strategies for local authorities and community food organisations, including coordinating provision across local authorities and supporting community food organisations to identify and address people's underlying needs. Our long-term recommendations include reform of the social security system and focusing on 'cash first' approaches.

Further information

This brief was researched and written by Fair Food Futures UK, a collaboration among the Department of Health Sciences (University of York), the School for Business & Society (University of York), UCL Social Research Institute, Bradford Institute for Health Research, Tower Hamlets and Bradford Councils.

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