



*I think it's all about  
dignity, choice and  
control*



# Participatory evaluation of food clubs funded through the Nourish the Nation programme

Final Report – March 2026

THE  
TAVISTOCK  
INSTITUTE  
OF HUMAN  
RELATIONS



Sainsbury's

# Acknowledgements

It has been a privilege to conduct this evaluation of the Nourish the Nation programme on behalf of Comic Relief and Sainsbury's. From the outset, we welcomed the opportunity to use participatory research to understand the lived experiences of those affected by food insecurity. As a research team, we were committed to immersing ourselves in the daily operations of the food clubs in a respectful and unobtrusive manner, and we could not have asked for a warmer reception.

We are deeply grateful to the members, staff, and volunteers who were so generous with their time and eager to share the impact these clubs have on their lives. Food clubs require communities to come together, and we saw the very best of this in both urban and rural areas across the UK. Each visit offered a memorable insight into the dedication of these communities. Whether sharing cups of tea in the pews of a Greater Manchester church, eating jacket potatoes in the South West, admiring locally grown swedes in Yorkshire, or being offered hot soup during a blizzard in the East of England, we were consistently met with kindness. We also felt privileged to be welcomed into an energising team check-in and a manager's leaving celebration, which highlighted the strong relational bonds at the heart of the model.

We hope this report provides valuable clarity on the experience and the impact of using food clubs. To this end, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to the 11 strategic stakeholders who participated in interviews for this evaluation. Your time, expertise, and reflections were invaluable in helping us situate the operational findings within the wider policy context.

Special thanks are due to the three funded partners at the centre of this report: The Bread and Butter Thing, Feeding Britain, and FoodSavers Network. We are particularly grateful to Vic Harper, Jim Fieldsend, Erica Roscoe, Andrew Forsey, Anna Lopez, Juli Thompson, Maria Varley-Tawfik, and Ben Clymo. Thank you for your continuous support, for facilitating our site visits, for your active participation in meetings, and for the occasional lift between locations.

**The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations research team: Anna, Fatima, Rhiannon, Ryan, and Thomas.**

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## Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
CR	Comic Relief
FB	Feeding Britain
FP	Funded partners
FSN	FoodSavers Network
GP	General Practitioner
NHS	National Health Service
RQ	Research question
TBBT	The Bread and Butter Thing
TIHR	The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations
UK	United Kingdom

# Executive summary

## Introduction

Sainsbury's and Comic Relief's *Nourish the Nation* programme supports a variety of organisations that work to tackle food insecurity, including three delivery partners (Feeding Britain, The Bread and Butter Thing and FoodSavers Network) that are focused on expanding the food club model to improve access to nutritious, affordable food for low-income communities across the UK, offering a dignified and preventative alternative to food banks. Alongside affordable food access, the model also integrates wraparound support such as welfare advice, financial services and community activities.

**£7.7 M**

Investment

**598**

Food clubs

**296,317**

People reached

Since 2022, Comic Relief (£1m) and Sainsbury's (£6.7m) have together invested £7.7 million to support 598 food clubs, reaching approximately 296,317 people. The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations conducted a participatory mixed-methods evaluation between May 2025 and March 2026, exploring members' experiences, the outcomes achieved for individuals and households, and the viability of food clubs as a long-term response to food insecurity. The evaluation combined site visits to 7 diverse food clubs, engagement with over 75 members, volunteers and staff, interviews with 11 national and local stakeholders, quantitative data analysis, and a rapid evidence review.

## Key findings



The food club model is widely seen and experienced as impactful and life changing, providing preventative and reparative support for households experiencing ongoing food insecurity as a result of financial precarity. It successfully assists those in need, while complementing, rather than replacing, emergency food banks. Food clubs help households stretch limited budgets, improve access to nutritious food, provide a welcoming space for social connection and create pathways to wider support services.

## Members' experience

The evaluation found that food clubs offer a profoundly positive and dignified experience for their members, successfully removing the stigma often associated with emergency food aid. While individual engagement varies according to need, members consistently derive value across three distinct levels, which we conceptualise as a 'three-layer model':

### Layer 1

#### **Affordable, good-quality food ('the hook and anchor'):**

Economic necessity is the primary driver of engagement. Access to a food club enables households to redirect income towards essential bills. Quality food and, in many models, choice is critical to sustained engagement. Without reliable, low-cost food provision the wider model does not function.

### Layer 2

#### **Dignity, welcome and social connection ('the environment'):**

Food clubs offer a welcoming and respectful environment that fosters dignity and agency. For many, they act as social hubs that reduce isolation and strengthen community ties. Even for those who engage in a more transactional way, the non-judgemental atmosphere remains central to their sense of value.

### Layer 3

#### **Wraparound prevention support ('the goal'):**

In many food clubs, food acts as a 'soft entry point' to wider advice and support, including welfare, debt, housing, health and savings schemes. Access to this layer remains uneven and dependent on local capacity and trust built over time.

While members greatly value the food clubs, the evaluation also identified several barriers, including limited opening hours, transport challenges and inconsistent access to culturally appropriate foods.

## Outcomes for members and others

Food clubs deliver both immediate relief and longer-term outcomes:

<b>Financial impacts</b>	Members consistently reported substantial cost savings, better budgeting, and reduced reliance on food banks. In some clubs, access to financial wraparound support (such as credit unions) further enhances long-term financial stability.
<b>Improvements in diet, health, social isolation and wellbeing</b>	Access to fresh, affordable food improves dietary quality and enables healthier home cooking for many members and reduces the skipping of meals. Members also reported improvements in managing pre-existing health conditions (e.g. diabetes, allergies). Crucially, membership reduces the chronic stress of food insecurity and leads to greater community belonging and improved mental wellbeing.
<b>Wider impacts</b>	The benefits extend beyond registered members. Food is frequently shared with extended family and neighbours, strengthening informal networks of mutual community support. For volunteers, involvement often builds confidence, skills and a greater sense of purpose.

## Food for thought

While the food club model has achieved notable success, the evaluation highlights several areas for reflection regarding its future scalability, inclusivity and long-term sustainability.

### For delivery partners:

- **Financial structuring:** Some food clubs could explore a stronger emphasis on a ‘stock sustainability’ approach. This involves a clear financial split: member contributions are used specifically to cover the cost of food, allowing external grant funding to be ring-fenced to pay for ‘value-add’ elements like professional staffing and wrap-around support.
- **Overcoming access barriers:** To deepen inclusivity, funded partners should consider trialling or extending evening/weekend access for those in work, and diversifying purchasing beyond generic surplus to include culturally specific staples for racially minoritised communities. Operating multiple smaller satellite distribution points from a central hub could also help overcome transport barriers in both rural and large urban areas.

### For funders:

- **Supply chain innovation:** As some food clubs move away from 'surplus-only' models, retail partners could explore facilitating 'cost-price' wholesale purchasing channels, improving the sector's financial viability and nutritional consistency.
- **Advocating for commissioning:** There is a strategic opportunity to support funded partners on how to raise the profile of food clubs and build the business case for multi-year local authority commissioning to ensure that they are further embedded into the national social safety net going forward.

### For future evaluations:

- **Tracking exit pathways:** The critical missing link in the preventative evidence base is understanding long-term destinations: tracking to what extent leaving members graduate to increased financial independence or cycle back into crisis.
- **Economic valuation:** To unlock statutory funding, future evaluation should explore the *feasibility* of quantifying avoided NHS and social care costs (e.g., via pilots or proxy measures), while being careful not to impose heavy data requirements that undermine the trust of members.





# 1. Introduction

The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) was commissioned by Comic Relief and Sainsbury's to deliver a participatory evaluation of food clubs funded through the *Nourish the Nation* programme. This programme supports a variety of organisations that work to tackle food insecurity, including three delivery partners (Feeding Britain, The Bread and Butter Thing and FoodSavers Network) that are focused on expanding the food club model to improve access to nutritious, affordable food for low-income communities.

The overall aim of the evaluation was to understand members' experiences of food clubs and assess their impact and sustainability as an alternative to food banks, identifying what works, for whom, and under what conditions and inform future investment in this model. It focuses on food clubs as a collective model rather than seeking to compare the specific approaches of individual delivery partners. As outlined in Chapter 2.2, the three delivery partners (as well as some of the individual food clubs they support) operate distinct models, with variations in delivery mechanisms, food sourcing and activity offers. As a result, some findings and observations may not apply uniformly across all partners and should be understood within the context of the diversity of the food club models.

In order to explore this overarching aim, the evaluation was structured around three thematic research questions (RQs) agreed with Comic Relief, Sainsbury's and the funded partners:

- RQ1**    **How do food club members experience the service, and what value does it provide?**
  
- RQ2**    **What difference have food clubs made to members' lives (including others in their household)?**
  
- RQ3**    **How viable and appropriate is the food club model for addressing food insecurity?**

## 1.1 Evaluation methodology

Our approach to evaluating the *Nourish the Nation* programme was grounded in participatory principles, utilising a mixed-methods design to capture both measurable outcomes and the lived experiences of food club members.

The core of the evaluation consisted of site visits to 7 food clubs, purposively selected to represent a diverse range of operational contexts. This sample included a mix of urban and rural settings (ranging from Glasgow and Leeds to rural Lincolnshire and Devon), various venue types (community centres, markets, and churches), and different service models (from basic provision to holistic wrap-around support). A full list of the 7 sites visited can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

To ensure inclusivity and reduce barriers to participation, the research team employed creative, flexible methods during these visits. These included observation of operations, informal 'tea and biscuit' group conversations, and anonymous 'fridge magnet' feedback stations, alongside formal semi-structured interviews.

It is worth noting some practical limitations regarding these creative tools. For instance, the 'fridge magnet' feedback stations saw varied levels of engagement; they were less effective at food clubs that lacked an obvious communal focal point to display the board, or where members did not linger after collecting their food. Consequently, the vast majority of qualitative data was captured through the formal interviews and informal conversations. The research team found that members were overwhelmingly open, receptive, and happy to engage in direct, face-to-face dialogue to share their experiences.

In total, the evaluation engaged:

- 54 members and 4 members who volunteer (via formal interviews and informal discussions);
- 10 volunteers involved in daily operations; and
- 8 staff members responsible for delivery and management.

To contextualise the site-level findings within the wider food insecurity policy landscape, we conducted in-depth interviews with 11 strategic stakeholders. This cohort included national and local policymakers, academic experts, senior leadership from the three funded partners, and representatives from other food insecurity charities (see [Appendix 2](#)). These discussions focused on the relevance of the food club model, national and local policy developments, and issues affecting long-term sustainability.

Qualitative data from the site visits was analysed using a combination of Thematic Analysis, Outcome Harvesting and Most Significant Change techniques. This approach allowed the research team to identify key themes, verify outcomes, and co-construct 'stories of change' that illustrate the impact of the programme for members, and are included throughout this report.

The stories were developed using two distinct narrative approaches:

### 1. Individual stories



Drawn directly from in-depth interviews, with specific identifying details redacted or slightly modified to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

### 2. Composite narratives



Where engagement was lighter-touch (e.g. informal 'tea and biscuit' conversations), data from more than one member at a single site were synthesised to create representative 'composite' stories of change.

The evaluation team also facilitated an online sensemaking workshop on 20th January 2026 with representatives from the three funded partners. Prior to the session, 7 draft 'stories of change' were shared with the funded partners for review. In line with the Most Significant Change methodology, the workshop provided a forum for participatory analysis, as part of which they were asked to collectively interpret the narratives by discussing and identifying what was typical, atypical, surprising, unsurprising, and what might be missing, both within and across the stories.

The insights generated from this discussion were treated as vital additional qualitative data, illuminating the funded partners' own values, operational realities, and understanding of impact. Through this participatory validation process, they concluded that all 7 stories held significant value in illustrating the diverse journeys and outcomes of their members. Finally, the session also generated new qualitative evidence regarding the funded partners' strategic vision for the expected outcomes of the model.

Qualitative findings were triangulated with a review of quantitative datasets. These included data on programme indicators collected by Comic Relief from all funded partners on reach, food distribution and outcomes, alongside partners' own annual member surveys and impact assessments. These surveys also formed the basis for several programme indicators, particularly those relating to members' self-reported outcomes (see [Appendix 3](#) for an overview of the data).

A key limitation of this approach is that the evaluation was reliant on partners' own data collection processes. Survey items and wording were not always consistent across organisations or over time. This limited the extent to which data could be aggregated and compared consistently.

Additionally, a rapid evidence review of existing literature on food clubs was conducted to understand the context of the evaluation (see [Appendix 4](#) for a full version of this).

## 1.2 Chapter overview

Following this introduction, the report begins by setting the strategic context in Chapter 2, outlining the policy landscape and details of the three funded partners supported by the programme. It then moves to the member experience in Chapter 3, which introduces the ‘three-layer model’ alongside an examination of barriers to access. Chapter 4 presents the evidence on impact and outcomes, focusing on financial resilience, health and wellbeing, and the wider ‘multiplier effect’ on families and communities.

This is followed by an assessment of the model’s viability and appropriateness in Chapter 5, in relation to operational effectiveness, strategic alignment, and the evidence required to strengthen the investment case. Finally, the report concludes in Chapter 6 with a summary of findings of this evaluation, offering a set of strategic reflections for partners and funders to consider as the model evolves.



## 2. Background to the Nourish the Nation programme

### 2.1 Programme context

Food insecurity has long been a serious problem in the UK, but levels have worsened significantly since the first Covid lockdown (DWP, 2024). Households are regarded as food insecure if they do not have physical and economic access to enough safe, nutritious food for an active and healthy life (DEFRA, 2024). From an already high baseline in 2020, the number of people experiencing food insecurity initially rose, then declined as restrictions eased, before rebounding sharply during the cost-of-living crisis. More recently, figures suggest a levelling off, but at a persistently high national level (DWP, 2024).

A recent Food Foundation Food Insecurity Tracking Survey (Food Foundation, 2025) shows that 14% of households, an estimated 7.3 million adults, were affected by food insecurity in January 2025, with 5% of households reporting not eating for a whole day because they could not afford or get access to food. Households that are more likely to experience food insecurity include those with children, racially minoritised families, families with a single adult or an adult living with a disability, and households in receipt of Universal Credit (DWP, 2024; DEFRA, 2024). Food insecure families were more likely to cut back on healthy foods including fruit, vegetables, fish, dairy or eggs.

It is in this context that use of food clubs (as well as food banks) has drastically increased in recent years, with estimates suggesting that by 2023, 5% of the UK population had used one (FSA, 2024). These clubs take various forms, from pop-up pantries in church halls to 'social supermarkets' – retail outlets that sell food and essential goods at reduced prices to people experiencing financial difficulties. While design varies, food clubs share a common purpose: offering affordable food in ways that preserve dignity through membership, choice and payment.

Food clubs are different from food banks, which provide short-term emergency food supplies (for example, a three-day supply) of mostly non-perishable goods for individuals who have been referred according to set criteria. Food clubs generally offer a broader and healthier range of food and operate on an ongoing membership basis, focused on affordability and dignity rather than emergency support.



## 2.2 The Nourish the Nation programme

Building on decades of partnership together, Sainsbury's and Comic Relief teamed up to launch *Nourish the Nation* in 2022. This programme aims to tackle food poverty in the UK by improving communities' access to nutritious, affordable food, helping to support those most in need right now whilst also supporting those at risk in the longer term.

The *Nourish the Nation* programme funds a variety of organisations that work to tackle food insecurity, including partners that support lower income households through increased access to affordable, nutritious food via food clubs spread across the UK. More recently, it has also supported integration of wraparound services, including benefits advice, financial inclusion, and health-related support.

Since 2022, £7.7 million in grants (£6.7 million from Sainsbury's *Nourish the Nation* programme and £1 million from Comic Relief) has been committed to three charities (see below) to expand their food club models to help people on low incomes buy nutritious food at an affordable price. Service users typically pay £6–£10 per week for access to healthy, nutritious food – much of it surplus from the UK supply chain – helping to reduce food waste and its environmental impact. Clubs often offer additional activities, such as cooking classes, children's events and social gatherings. In some cases, members also receive advice on housing, welfare or health, or are offered savings accounts through partnerships with Credit Unions.

Overall, the *Nourish the Nation* programme helped to fund 598 food clubs across the three funded partners. Since 2022, this has provided access to food for approximately 296,317 people. Of the total number reached, calculations from Feeding Britain and The Bread and Butter Thing indicate that about 7% were children aged 0–4, and 19% were children aged 5–17. According to funded partners' data, food equivalent to over 46 million meals have been distributed, which equates to 16,053 tonnes of food saved from going to waste. It is worth noting that calculations as well as sources of data varied by funded partner (see [Appendix 3](#) for further details).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> These figures are based on programme indicator data submitted by funded partners between October 2025 and February 2026.

## Rachel<sup>2</sup>'s story: Cooking fresh, cutting costs and catching up at the food club

Rachel is a mother with small children living in a rural village in the East of England. She has been attending the food club regularly, often meeting the same friends each week and sometimes shopping with other family members or neighbours in mind.

Rachel first heard about the club through friends and now tries to come each week, sitting with the same group for a chat so she does not “*feel as isolated.*” What she values most are the people – “*we’ve made friends here*” – and the practical mix of fruit, veg and basics that supplement her main shop. Some weeks bring stand-out savings: “*Last week, there was cereal, we had two boxes. They’re £3 each normally, so we saved a lot.*” It also means she can buy things for her children she could otherwise not afford: “*the children enjoy trying new things, from fruit to cereal bars.*” Rachel is careful to minimise waste. If there is too much of one item, she shares with others, sometimes passing on extra items or things she will not use to family, friends or neighbours.

Fresh ingredients matter because she cooks from scratch, including for family members with allergies. Living nearby is a major benefit; going into town would be a longer trip, while the club is “*just over the road.*” The steady supply eases worry – “*I don’t have to worry about what’s in my pantry*” – and the cost savings help with other weekly expenses.

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<sup>2</sup> Names of food club members in all stories have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

## 2.3 The three funded partners

The programme funded the expansion of food club provision across three charities, as follows:



"We want to demonstrate how hunger and its underlying causes can be addressed, and use this knowledge and evidence to advocate for systemic change to eliminate hunger in the UK."

**Feeding Britain (FB)** is a charity with a vision of a UK where no one goes hungry. They support a national network of 143 regional and local anti-hunger partnerships, which include more than 410 Affordable Food Clubs serving 91,000 households across the UK.

FB food clubs offer access to low-cost groceries for members. Their model is not rigid and includes different forms of food clubs, such as pantries, social supermarkets, and cooperatives. These often have points-based systems, where each item is assigned a number of points that correspond to a set monetary value. Some clubs operate on a fixed weekly membership fee, which allows members to choose a set quantity or value of food.

In other locations, food is sold at significantly discounted prices. Food clubs source their food from wholesalers, through local donations, and surplus redistribution. As well as accessing food, some clubs offer people the opportunity to take part in cookery sessions to learn how to cook healthy, nutritious meals. Members can also access support to help them manage their finances and benefits.

Flexible core funding from Nourish the Nation helped FB to expand its food clubs across the UK, and to grow its core team to support this. In addition, the funding helped to expand FB's wraparound services programme, 'Pathways from Poverty', by growing its network and number of local partners to bring in advice workers to support individuals and families further through welfare, benefits and financial support.





"Food for  
Health not  
wealth.

Save money  
on your  
weekly shop

Save food  
from going to  
landfill

Save in a  
recognised  
Credit Union  
scheme"

**FoodSavers Network (FSN)** is run by Inn Churches and works with regional partners to set up food clubs, which are currently based in Bradford, Calderdale and Leeds in West Yorkshire. It combines food clubs and the opportunity for members to accrue regular savings in a Credit Union account in their name.

Through a network of low cost FoodSaver markets, members can access high quality fresh and store cupboard food (about 15 items) for a small weekly fee (typically £6). Surplus food is collected from supermarkets, restaurants and other businesses, and distributed through the food clubs.

For every shop, £1 of the membership fee is saved into personal Credit Union savings account for the member, building financial resilience and healthy savings habits. Members can also access opportunities such as cookery classes and wider support tailored to each local community.

Nourish the Nation helped FSN to grow and develop, increasing the number of projects in West Yorkshire, and beginning to grow the network further afield across the UK. A final element was the creation of a showcase FoodSavers Cookery School in Bradford, providing a training space to develop cooking skills, and helping children and families to cook from scratch whatever their budget. Latterly they are opening a new FoodSavers cookery school in Leeds Kirkgate Market.



EMERGENCY EXIT





"Our mission is to unleash the power of food and ignite long-lasting change in struggling neighbourhoods across the UK"

**The Bread and Butter Thing (TBBT)** supports more than 150 food clubs across the North of England.

These are delivered in partnership with local community organisations and powered by dedicated community volunteers, typically operating from inclusive local venues such as community centres, schools and church halls. TBBT operates a business to consumer (B2C), membership-based food club model, supporting households experiencing financial pressure, including both people in work and those out of work. Clubs run 52 weeks of the year, including weekends, providing consistent and reliable access to affordable food within the communities where people live.

Members pay less than £10 per week to receive three pre-packed bags of food made up of fruit and vegetables, chilled and frozen goods and cupboard staples. TBBT redistributes large volumes of surplus food sourced directly from supermarkets, food manufacturers and farms. The clubs are open to everyone and do not require a referral or eligibility criteria to join, helping reduce stigma and ensuring people can access affordable food with dignity.

Funding from Nourish the Nation has enabled TBBT to expand and strengthen its preventative model, increasing the number of community hubs and deepening partnerships with local authorities, health services and charities. Through these partnerships, hubs can connect members with additional support such as income maximisation advice, digital inclusion, health and wellbeing services, and fuel and energy support. Alongside this practical help, many hubs also host Big Brew Time, where members and volunteers share a cup of tea together.



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## Shamilla's story: Eating better and easing financial and mental stress

Shamilla is a full-time carer for her husband who has cancer and lives at home with both him and her adult son. Shamilla explained that several years ago her husband became seriously ill and could no longer work. She left her job to care for him, which meant their income dropped sharply. Early on she tried other local low-cost food options but switched to the food club because “this has got lots of fruit and veg... which I love,” along with basics like bread and milk that would otherwise be expensive to purchase. Her first visit left a strong impression: *“I was really impressed by the selection of stuff that we got.”*

Rising prices made the difference especially stark. As she puts it, *“You can go into [supermarket] and you can spend a tenner on 3 or 4 items.”* At the club, she can routinely get cereals, tea, coffee, pasta and fresh fruit and vegetables for a similar amount of money. The milk is important because her husband drinks a lot of it: *“we’ll go through four pints a day.”* The food club is five minutes from home and is open every week, so timing and location “suit” her.

The club also makes her feel better. Knowing it will be there each week *“just reduces stress because you don’t have to worry about things.”* Small social moments matter too. *“Normally I only see my husband. So, it’s nice seeing different faces”.* She has friendly conversations while queuing or with one of the volunteers and appreciates that “pretty much everybody speaks to somebody else.” She does not usually stay for lunches, but likes knowing they exist and that other services, such as advice or benefits support, are available face to face if ever needed.

Overall, *“it has made a big, big impact, because obviously it saves a lot of money.”* Previously, there were *“some weeks I couldn’t go to the supermarket because I just didn’t have the money”*, but *“I’ve not been like that in a very long time”*.

## 3. Members' experience of food clubs

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses RQ1 (How do food club members experience the service, and what value does it provide?) as well as the following four sub-questions:

- What do members value most about food clubs?
- How do members experience food clubs compared to other forms of support (particularly food banks)?
- How do experiences differ across members?
- What barriers affect access and sustained engagement?

Our analysis of data from our site visits across the 7 food clubs reveals that members experience and derive value from them in different ways depending on their immediate needs and the depth of their engagement. We have conceptualised this as a **'three-layer model'**: with affordable, good quality food as the hook that brings people into the food club and the anchor that keeps them coming back, surrounded by two other layers of value.



Each of these three layers are explored below.

## 3.2 Layer 1: The ‘hook and anchor’ – affordable, good quality food



**Key insight:** Food is the hook and anchor of the user experience. Without affordable, good-quality food, the rest of the model does not work.

The primary hook for members’ engagement in the food clubs is economic necessity. This is what brings most members to access a food club in the first place. The positive experience and weekly consistency of the club is the anchor which keeps them engaged.

Across all sites, from the rural village hall in Boston to the urban centre in Glasgow, our conversations with members almost always began with comments about the cost of living and the price of food in supermarkets. Many described using the food club to get a full weekly shop for £6–£10, including fresh fruit and vegetables, chilled and frozen food, and branded items they could not afford at supermarket prices.



*"Everything is getting too expensive in [supermarkets]. It would be like £40 and I can get a shop for £10 [here]. I would be struggling otherwise."*

(Food club member)

For many members, access to the food club is the difference between getting by and going without. A recent FSN member survey showed that half of respondents felt the food club solved their food access challenges while 43% of respondents agreed that the pantry meets their food needs (FSN, 2025). A TBBT member survey found that 93% of members reported that food clubs helped them save money on food purchases (TBBT, 2025).

The ability to get food for a fraction of retail prices allows households to redirect funds to other critical bills. Across the 7 sites, members repeatedly emphasised that even access to basic items made a significant difference, allowing them to avoid cutting back on other essential household expenses, particularly on gas and electricity. Several described the food club as preventing reliance on family or food banks.

However, continued engagement is driven by more than just price; it is driven by food *quality* and *choice*. Some members specifically contrasted their experience of a food club with the food banks model. The fact that the food is fresh, often including meat, fruit, and vegetables, is a key factor in sustained engagement. For many, the key benefit is knowing that each week there will be good, varied food available, reducing anxiety about whether there will be “*enough food this week*”.



*"The quality of food is superb; the amount of food is superb considering the size of the shop and the staff are very good."*

(Food club member/volunteer)

Interestingly, the 'surprise' element of the pre-packed bags (common in the TBBT model) were cited as encouraging some to try healthy foods they would not risk buying at full retail prices. One member in Salford noted: *"I live on my own. I am introduced to foods I didn't think I'd try."* Similarly, a member in Boston noted that it is *"quite exciting for the children to see what is in the bag each week,"* introducing treats like cereal bars that are usually too expensive.

In contrast to the pre-packed bag model, members at FSN sites in Bradford and Leeds and the FB sites highlighted the specific value of the 'pantry' or social supermarket models, which allows them to choose their own items. Another effective strategy involved clubs sharing recipes or holding ad hoc cooking classes to explore how to cook less known items, such as *"cooking with mooli"* seen in Leeds. One member in Bradford described this as critical to their engagement, noting that being able to browse and pick specific ingredients felt *"just like going to a normal shop"*, which reduced the anxiety of potentially receiving food their children would not eat.



### 3.3 Layer 2: The environment – dignity, welcome and social connection



**Key insight:** Wrapped around the food offer is the environment in which it is delivered. A large majority of members value the dignity, welcome and social feel of the club, even if this is not always the reason they first attend.

While almost all members initially come for the food without the need for a referral, many return for the feeling of dignity and welcome that the food clubs provide. A central theme in members' experiences was the sense of choice and control food clubs offer compared to food banks. Food banks, by necessity, often involve the distribution of emergency parcels in a crisis setting, which can feel impersonal. In contrast, many food clubs allow members to choose their own food, creating an experience that feels closer to everyday shopping.

As one food club manager reflected, people often arrive with hesitations rooted in the organisation's association with food banks, but once inside the food club space, their perceptions shift:



*"I think it's all about dignity and choice and control... for some people [the food bank association] might have been a bit of a barrier... but then they come in and go, 'oh, this just feels like a shop, and it's nice and friendly in the hall.'"*

(Food club staff)

Staff described how moving people from food banks into food clubs can feel like a step away from the shame some associate with emergency aid. One volunteer shared the story of a pensioner who had fallen into rent arrears and was "*absolutely devastated*" to need food bank support. The opportunity to use the food club instead allowed him to receive practical support and restored a sense of agency and dignity.

This dignity is reinforced by the personal touch of the volunteers. Members told us that they value being greeted by name and having time for informal conversations with volunteers or other members. Volunteers (many of whom are current or former members themselves) and staff emphasised that people return because they feel welcomed and safe, not pressured to engage beyond what they are comfortable with. In Glasgow, an elderly member contrasted the food club with the anonymity of modern retail supermarkets:



*"They know me by my first name... [At the supermarket] they just have self-service tills. I cannot do it. [Here] they treat me with respect."*

(Food club member)

For a large cohort of members, the food club functions as a vital social space. We observed members arriving early to sit in the café areas, drinking tea and chatting with volunteers. In a recent FSN survey, over half of respondents shared that they enjoy talking with the staff (FSN, 2025). For those living alone or facing social isolation, this interaction is a primary reason for attendance.



*"I know people here, I have a catch up with them."*

(Food club member)

Others spoke about the value of simply seeing different faces, having light conversations, or feeling part of something regular and familiar. Informal social activities, such as celebrating religious festivals (like Christmas, Eid, or Diwali) to reflect the local community, or shared humour among regulars, were described as creating “social glue” and protective factors against isolation.

In Bradford, the food club provides an opportunity for relationships to develop across communities. Volunteers noted that the club brings together a diverse community in terms of for example, language and religion. The research team observed a morning prayer which was held in both English and Farsi. While language barriers exist, the shared act of choosing food and sharing recipes creates a sense of community.

However, not everyone has the time or desire to linger. In Salford, a mother of four described a purely transactional but still positive engagement: she collects her bags, rushes home to pick up her children from school and does not socialise. For her, the ‘environment’ is valuable because it is efficient and perceived as non-judgemental, allowing her to access healthy food, at a lower price, without stigma.



## Lucy's story: Saving on staples and staying connected with friends and family

Lucy is a single mum in her 30s and is from Yorkshire; she works full time and cares for her autistic daughter. She joined after seeing the club advertised on Facebook and now goes every week, often meeting friends or relatives there.

Lucy uses the club to top up her normal shop, focusing on day-to-day items: *"I always get milk and cereal,"* and, as she says, *"even just getting cheese is a saver."* There is nearly always something useful – *"You can always get toiletries, cat food is useful"* – and *"There is free stuff, like free [personal hygiene] products."* Uniform rails have helped kit out her daughter for school, and the on-site noticeboard has led them to access youth activities and cooking classes.

Money is tight on a single income, so the savings are decisive. She estimates that she now saves about half compared to a regular shop and has saved £55 via the credit union. Without the club, *"we'd be living off beans on toast,"* and at times she would have cut back more on gas and electricity. She likes to arrive early – *"If you come early, you get the best stuff"* – and plans meals around whatever is best value that week.

The social side matters too. It is *"a friendly space"* and an easy way to see friends and relatives she rarely meets mid-week: *"My gran recruits everyone in the family,"* so it has become a shared routine across generations. She feels part of the place and sometimes takes a treat from the 'free' table, even things she would normally avoid in the supermarket, because it makes the visit feel special for her daughter.

### 3.4 Layer 3: The goal – wrap-around prevention



**Key insight:** Wrap-around support can be transformative, accessed either through trust built over time or through ad hoc, embedded services.

The third layer of experience of food clubs is access to wrap-around support – the advice on benefits, debt, housing, and health that helps to create long-term stability and potentially reduce the need for continued access to food support. Engagement with this layer is rarely immediate but is slightly uneven across members and food clubs; it is usually the result of trust built over time.

Quantitative data from two funded partners indicates that more than two-thirds of members accessed at least one form of wrap-around support, such as cooking and nutrition activities, social hubs, advice on benefits, debt, energy or housing, and credit union membership.<sup>3</sup> Several staff highlighted that food acts as the ‘soft entry point’. Members who would not feel comfortable attending a Citizens Advice Bureau or a debt clinic will engage with those services because they are embedded in a space they already trust.



*"For some people it's historic debt... for others it's about the situation now... it's one of the budgeting solutions we can offer."*

(Food club volunteer)

The value here lies in the accessibility of the support. In Glasgow, the food club sits adjacent to housing and immigration advice services, allowing for seamless referrals. In London, the project lead emphasised that the food is simply the vehicle for a wider duty of care:



*"It's not just about 'you've got some food'... it's about what can we do to support you in getting out of these situations."*

(Food club staff)

However, the availability, consistency and visibility of wrap-around services also vary significantly between partners and sites, shaping who benefits and how. Some members are unaware of what support is available; others feel they do not need it, do not have the time, or do not want to “bother people”, or find that the specific services offered, such as debt or housing advice, simply do not apply to their current situation. For instance, in Salford, a member mentioned being handed a leaflet about mental health support; while she thought it was a “good idea,” she did not feel it was relevant to her personally.

<sup>3</sup> This is based on programme data submitted to Comic Relief from The Bread and Butter Thing as of October 2025, and survey data from Feeding Britain (2025).

This suggests that while the offer of support is a key part of the model's value, member engagement with it relies heavily on the visibility of the service and the proactive (yet sensitive) encouragement of staff and volunteers, and the strength of the club's referral links into the wider, often overstretched, advice sector (such as Citizens Advice).

### 3.5 Barriers to access and sustained engagement



**Key insight:** Accessibility is about more than just the price of food. Practical barriers such as opening only during working hours or the lack of culturally specific foods can create an 'unintended exclusion' for individuals.

While the three-layer model demonstrates why members value food clubs, our fieldwork also highlighted some of the practical frictions that determine who can and cannot access such support. Members and staff described these challenges in terms of logistics, environment, and the suitability of the food itself.

Many of the food clubs visited rely heavily on members having the time to attend during the working day and the physical ability to carry goods home. On several occasions, we observed the time constraints affecting members; in one instance, we observed a mother rushing in with a trolley to collect six bags of food before heading off again. For her, the limited opening window created a pressure point that made the social aspect of the club impossible to access. Staff also commented that those in work often struggle to use food clubs during working hours. Some food clubs have started to address this by offering evening or weekend sessions, sometimes on a pilot basis.

In rural areas, the barrier is physical distance, with many members only being able to access the food club by car. In several cases, we found evidence of informal community support addressing this barrier: one elderly woman with mobility issues relies entirely on a neighbour to physically collect her shop. This suggests that without such informal networks, the most physically vulnerable or those without transport can be excluded from the service. To help mitigate this, both FB and TBBT fund 'mobile hubs' – vehicles that travel directly into isolated rural communities, coastal areas, or specific urban housing estates to address local 'food deserts'. However, while this mobile approach is an effective workaround, it currently represents a minority of clubs and would require further logistical and financial investment to scale more widely.

While the "*bustling community hub*" is a draw for many, it can be overwhelming for others. In London, staff have adapted to this by introducing a "*golden half-hour*", a quieter slot specifically for over-60s and those who find crowds difficult, while another food club in Tiverton had expanded provision to Saturdays to allow some members to attend the food club at quieter times. This suggests that the noise and busyness of a successful food club can inadvertently act as a barrier to neurodiverse members or the elderly, unless specific protected quiet time is ring-fenced.

Diversity of food choices informed by culture and religion was said by several of the food clubs to be a goal, and for some members it is a practical determinant of whether the club is relevant to their needs. In Glasgow, a member (speaking Arabic via a translator) explained that her primary reason for attending was not just price, but the specific availability of Halal meat, something which was always available when she arrived.

Conversely, in other clubs we saw how a lack of choice can become a barrier, limiting its value to some individuals or families. Some members described the "*hit and miss*" nature of surplus foods. For families with allergies or specific dietary needs, the risk of paying a membership fee for a bag of unusable food or accessing a pantry with lack of relevant options can be a significant disincentive to return.





## Andreas' story: Finding stability and hope through the food club

Andreas came to the South West of England from Poland in 2005 and until December 2024 always worked. He now comes to the food club weekly after losing his job due to worsening diabetes and related health issues. He lost feeling in his foot, had infections and spent time in hospital. Andreas explained that money was so tight that after rent and council tax, he sometimes had only about £310 to live on for the month and had found himself homeless for 2 months.

The food club has become a lifeline for Andreas. For £6.50 a week, he can choose 15 items as well as fresh vegetables. That lets him cook proper meals like chicken with potatoes, rice or pasta, which helps him manage his diabetes much better than buying “*ready-made food full of sugar*”. As he put it, “*If you go to the shop for £6.50, you are lucky if you get a sandwich.*” The food club allows him to plan a week of meals and keep his insulin routine on track.

But it is more than food. Andreas explained that staff helped him navigate a system that he does not fully understand. They phoned the council for him and negotiated a payment plan for his debt which took a huge weight off his mind. They supported his Universal Credit assessments, his Personal Independence Payment (PIP) application and now an appeal, and they let him use their phone when he is out of credit. When he was homeless in winter, they helped him find a place to live because “*they know who they talk to.*”

He feels that the support allows him to focus on his health: “*I monitor my blood sugar levels and feel everything is much, much better*”. He comes every Thursday, sees friendly faces and sometimes meets others at the church meals connected with the club. In his own words, “*They saved my life... they bring the hope.*”

## 4. Impact and outcomes of using food clubs

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses RQ2: “What difference have food clubs made to members’ lives, including impacts on other members of their households?” as well as the following subsidiary questions:

- To what extent have food clubs improved members' food security and dietary quality?
- What impact have food clubs had on volunteers' and members' mental and physical wellbeing and social connections?
- What evidence exists of longer-term changes?
- How have wraparound services contributed to outcomes?
- Are there unintended outcomes, positive or negative?

It draws on qualitative data from formal interviews and informal conversations with members, staff and volunteers, triangulated with quantitative indicator and survey data from the three funded partners (FB, FSN and TBBT).

### 4.2 Financial impacts



**Key insight:** For many members, food clubs provide the critical financial margin that allows them to pay for heat, light, and water, transforming their ability to manage household budgets.

There was a clear consensus among members across all 7 sites visited that food clubs significantly improve their financial situations. As discussed in Chapter 3, this impact begins with immediate cost savings as a result of their access to low-cost food. All members we spoke to reported substantial cost savings compared with purchasing equivalent food in supermarkets, with several noting that they could not afford mainstream retailers. These savings enabled household income to stretch further, allowing money to be redirected towards essential costs such as energy bills, family expenses, or birthday and Christmas presents.



*"We make it last. The shop is made to last the week. So, money can go on gas, electricity and water."*

(Food club member)

For those on Universal Credit or state pensions, this difference is significant. It is described as “the difference between *just* managing and managing” and to making household finances (more) viable. One member summarised this impact in the following way:



*"Our Universal Credit lasts the whole month now, rather than running out a week before, you know."*

(Food club member)

While definitive evidence of the impact on financial independence remains a gap for future longitudinal research to fill, there are clear indications from this study that food clubs help members transition away from day-to-day crisis management. Indicator data from two partners shows that 43% of members reported that food club membership lowered their reliance on food banks (though it is worth noting that not all members utilise such emergency food aid prior to joining).

Indeed, FB’s latest survey data indicates that among members who had previously used a food bank, 63% reported a reduced need for emergency food support<sup>4</sup>. Crucially, this reduced reliance on food banks is not merely a shift in where members source their food; it represents a shift from unpredictable crisis support to a more reliable routine. Indeed, members highlighted that the service ensures a more predictable weekly food supply, making it easier to plan meals and budget accurately, thereby laying the groundwork for greater financial stability.

Furthermore, access to wrap-around support has deepened this impact in some food clubs. In Tiverton, volunteers described how the food club acts as a gateway to resolving "*historic debt*" issues that hang over members' heads, allowing them to move from crisis management to stability. This link between food and finance is most explicit in the FSN model in Leeds and Bradford, where membership is directly linked to a credit union account. We found evidence that this structural integration encourages saving habits among those who had never saved before.

As one staff member observed, the model "*gets people into the habit of saving*" by normalising small, regular deposits alongside their food shop. One volunteer noted that for many members, this was their first interaction with a formal financial institution, providing a vital safety net for unexpected costs like "*a broken washing machine*". The recent Funded partners survey provides further evidence of the positive impact of financial wraparound support; members who accessed financial advice were more likely to report a reduced need to skip meals (Funded partners, 2025).

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<sup>4</sup> Funded partners measured this differently; please see Appendix 3 for further details.



### 4.3 Diet, health and wellbeing impacts



**Key insight:** The food club model delivers a ‘health dividend’. By lowering the financial barrier to fresh food and reducing the chronic stress of food insecurity, clubs are driving improvements in both physical diet and mental health.

For most members we spoke with, the food clubs contributed to improved dietary quality. They reported increased access to fruit and vegetables and the opportunity to try healthier foods that they previously avoided for cost reasons. Others told us that before attending the food club they bought very little fresh food, skipped more expensive items like fresh butter, or ate very basic meals with much lower levels of nutrition. The affordability of the food club means they can now access a larger quantity and wider variety of food, often for the same price or less than for a few supermarket items.

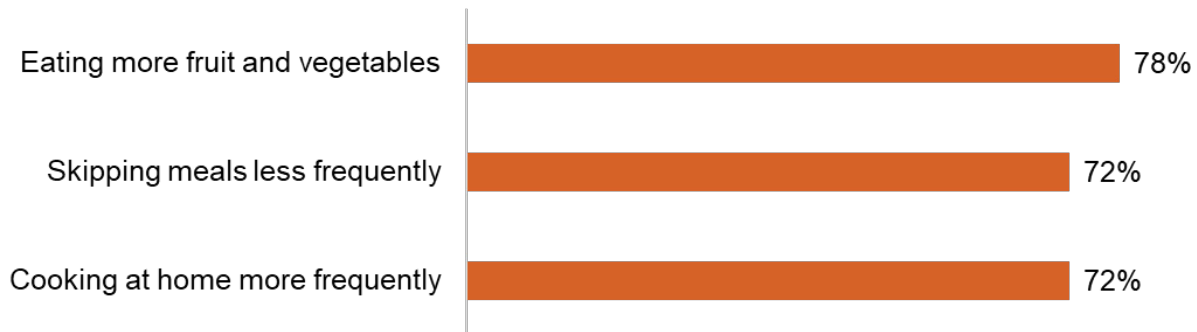


*"We didn't really used to buy a lot of fresh stuff. And then we started getting into buying fresh stuff because [it] was better tasting and healthier."*

(Food club member)

Member survey evidence from TBBT and FB supports this, with 72% of respondents reporting skipping meals less often (see Figure 1). A substantial proportion of respondents also report improvements in diet as a result of using a food club. For TBBT, 47% said that their diet had improved, while for FB, 99% indicated it was ‘sometimes’, ‘often’ or ‘always’ true that they could afford to eat more balanced meals in the past 30 days. Recent FB and TBBT surveys also found that nearly four in five members report eating more fruit and vegetables (FB 2025; TBBT, 2025).

**Figure 1. Reported impact of food club use on dietary quality**



Source: Indicator data and survey data from TBBT and FB of June and October 2025 respectively.

Some members also reported that having access to a wider range of ingredients encouraged them to cook more at home, experiment with new ingredients and prepare different meals. This is reflected in the quantitative data, with 64% of survey respondents stating that they are cooking more meals at home since using the food club, while according to the most recent TBBT survey, over four in five members have tried new foods since joining the food club (TBBT, 2025).



*"Sometimes we'll get some fruit where, you know, people might not understand what it is or might not know how to use it. [...] They can share ideas with each other."*

(Food club staff)

This dietary shift was said to have had specific impacts on physical health in some cases. In Salford, a member suffering from acid reflux noted that the consistent access to fruit and vegetables allowed them to manage the condition without medication. Access to fresh ingredients supports members with weight loss or improved condition management (such as diabetes). Others noted the importance of consistent access to specific foods to support treatment or recovery during serious illness and managing allergies.



*"In my family we have allergies, so the veg is good for cooking meals from scratch."*

(Food club member)

## Social connections and mental health

As described in the previous chapter, a lot of the clubs function as community hubs. For individuals experiencing isolation, the club provides a regular reason to leave their house and meet and interact with others:

“We had one lady who chooses to come in on Saturday because she just has such bad anxiety, she and another client, they’d greet each other by name and have a cup of coffee. They never would have met if they hadn’t been at the pantry.”  
(Food club staff)

Several people we spoke to described forming friendships and maintaining contact outside of food club sessions.

“I go every week and it is an occasion to see friends who also come to the food club as I don’t always have time to see friends in the week.”  
(Food club member)

This aligns with indicator data from two funded partners, where 74% of survey respondents reported feeling more connected to their community as a result of using the services. The TBBT survey found that 58% of members had made friends since joining the food club and nearly two-thirds of members felt less alone since joining TBBT. The FB survey also found that members who participate in social activities report higher levels of community cohesion (TBBT, 2025; FB, 2025).

Members also described a reduction in the chronic "background stress" of food insecurity; knowing that food is guaranteed allows them to "relax" and regain a sense of control over their lives. Some also described reduced stress around household finances, as the service means they no longer have to worry about empty fridges or borrowing money:

“I started a different life, and I’m just more happy, I’m not stressed like when I was.”  
(Food club member)

This qualitative evidence aligns with quantitative data collected across all funded partners: 79% of members<sup>5</sup> reported feeling less worried about being able to afford food since starting to use a food club. Others also highlighted the psychological benefits of having something to look forward to, as well as the positive impact of occasional treats or non-essential items, which provide small moments of enjoyment and choice that can improve a sense of overall wellbeing. Indeed, a recent FSN survey showed that over half of respondents thought life had improved for them (FSN, 2025).

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<sup>5</sup> This percentage is based on survey data collected by all three funded partners and represents a weighted average.



## Cynthia's story: Stretching the shop and sharing the chat

Cynthia lives in London and is in her late 50s, she attends the food club most weeks, sometimes travelling in from another neighbourhood. She heard about the club through friends and often comes with them.

Cynthia uses the club to top up her shopping from another local supermarket, especially with fresh produce. What keeps her returning is the welcome: volunteers and members know each other, she can sit with a hot drink, and she enjoys having a “*chit chat*” while a friend or neighbour helps with the bags when walking is difficult. Seasonal extras such as double tokens at Christmas help at pressure points in the year.

Affordability is key for her. In her words, the “*price is cheap,*” and the savings free up money when bills rise. On weeks when the budget is tight, being able to rely on “*good-quality basics and fresh fruit and veg*” means she can still cook what she needs. She sometimes uses a food bank alongside the club to get through tougher periods.

The club is also where friendships have grown. She first came on a friend's recommendation, and now she meets the same faces, stays for a tea or biscuit at the café stand and looks forward to the chat as much as the shopping. She says the club has had a “*big impact on her life,*” giving her people to talk to and reducing the strain of the weekly shop.

## 4.4 The multiplier effect: ripples beyond the household



**Key insight:** The benefits do not stop at the member. Food clubs act as engines of community resilience, fuelling informal networks of care where food is shared with extended families, neighbours, and the wider community.

One significant finding from the fieldwork is that the benefits of the food club often appeared to extend beyond the registered member. Several members described a "*multiplier effect*" where surplus food is shared with neighbours, extended family, and grandchildren. Rather than being an incidental outcome, this sharing creates informal networks of mutual support that strengthen community resilience.

In Salford, one member explained that they purchase two bags of food specifically to support their elderly parents. In Boston, an interviewee described giving 20% of their food, specifically the sweet items they do not eat, to neighbours with children. In Leeds, a grandmother noted that the food club allows her to feed her grandchildren when they stay over, alleviating a "hidden financial burden" that often falls on kinship carers.



*"I take out what I want. If there's something, I don't know what it is, I'll leave it in for [my daughter], because she's [...] got the two girls. [...] So they eat everything. Literally everything. So it's split between us."*

(Food club member)

Members reported feeling good about helping others and valued knowing that surplus food was benefiting other households. One member also described contributing to an informal community network of mutual support:



*"We all help each other out – we pick blackberries and apples... it feels like we have a local grocery store in our little square."*

(Food club member)

### Staff and volunteers

While the primary focus of the evaluation was on members, the data also provides evidence of the impact on staff and volunteers. For many, volunteering acts as a reciprocal relationship: they give up their time but get back skills, confidence, and a sense of purpose. Thus, for some, volunteering in a food club helped to improve their English language skills and built up the confidence required to re-enter the workforce.

In Bradford, volunteers who were in the process of seeking asylum described how the role provided structure and language practice. Several volunteers across the sites have successfully moved into full-time employment, using the voluntary work as an opportunity to gain valuable experience to add to their CVs in a low-pressure environment.

Other volunteers reported a stronger sense of self-worth and reduced isolation. In Bradford, one noted that the role was part of their "*Christian calling*" to serve neighbours, which directly relieved their own stress. For those recovering from mental health crises or long-term sickness, the routine and social validation of the role were described as transformative. Another volunteer described how it gave them a sense of purpose during a difficult period of unemployment:

“ “It gets you out of the house... meeting people. It's better than sitting at home looking at [your] four walls.”  
(Food club member)

This sense of purpose among volunteers mirrors the improved sense of agency reported by members, highlighting a key dynamic of the food club model: it is not a one-way service, but a reciprocal system. Whether through saving money, sharing food with neighbours, or regaining confidence through volunteering, the clubs foster a cycle of mutual support that extends far beyond the food itself.



## Ian's story: Improved wellbeing and food security through volunteering at an inner-city community shop

Ian is a weekly volunteer and a member of the food club. He has lived locally for well over a decade. He shared that he has managed periods of poor mental health throughout his life, often more pronounced when struggling financially. Ian is reliant on universal credit and shared he has always struggled to cover all his bills and food. During the pandemic he began volunteering with a local group, helping with food distribution, then became a trustee and helped set up the current community shop. He now volunteers every week sharing that he loves “*engaging with the public*” and, in a diverse building with many refugee households “*spread a wee love and happiness.*”

Ian said that many families using the food club are from Syria, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan; he highlights that “*the kids are amazing,*” often bilingual, and that people value small comforts like a seat, a cup of tea, and free clothing or toys. Ian signposts neighbours to the nearby Links drop-in for benefits, housing and immigration advice, with translation support on site.

Ian reflected that for customers, value and quality matter. He thought people “*really appreciate the shop being here*” and that the food quality is “*amazing*”, with supplies from major supermarkets sold at a discounted rate. As a member himself, Ian said that “*my kitchen cupboards are always full... The money that I'm saving there is superb... I can relax all the time now.*” Ian can now stretch his £385-fortnightly income, so he no longer has to borrow before payday, and he is able to eat a wider range of foods. After receiving an energy-saving “*air fryer*” from the food club, *mealtimes feel transformed: “My taste buds have never been so excited!”* As well as the financial impact, Ian shared that volunteering has improved his wellbeing: “*I feel as if I've got a worth now!*”

## 5. Viability of the food club model

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores RQ3 (“*How viable and appropriate is the food club model for addressing food insecurity?*”) as well as the following related sub-questions:

- What operational factors enable or constrain food clubs' effectiveness and sustainability?
- How does the food club model align with or complement other local, regional and governmental strategies and initiatives on addressing food insecurity?
- What evidence would strengthen the case for continued investment in food clubs?

### 5.2 Overarching viability and appropriateness



**Key insight:** The food club model is a ‘life jacket’, not a ‘lifeboat’. It is most appropriate as a preventative and reparative measure for the ‘squeezed middle’ facing food insecurity rather than those already in acute financial crisis.

The overall consensus among stakeholders is that the food club model is a highly viable and appropriate intervention, though it should not be viewed as a universal solution for all forms of food insecurity. In particular, it is viewed as reaching those facing ongoing structural and financial precarity – such as old age pensioners, large families with low levels of income, or people with disabilities or long-term health conditions – rather than those in acute financial crisis.

This aligns with recent large-scale research by Blake (2026), which demonstrates that food clubs act not only as a preventative measure against acute crisis, but also as a ‘reparative’ tool that can rebuild resilience for those experiencing compounding harms. Furthermore, her profiling of members confirms that food clubs are particularly effective at reaching households navigating complex pressures – such as large families with low incomes, individuals managing in-work poverty, and those with full-time caring responsibilities for people with long-term health conditions.

The metaphor used by one of the funded partners is that while food banks act as a lifeboat for those in acute crisis, food clubs function as a life jacket, offering preventative support to stop households from going under:



*"The food bank is the emergency service – it is the lifeboat that comes out to get you when you have already drowned. We are the life jacket. We stop you from going under in the first place."*

(Funded partner)

This distinction is crucial to the model's perceived appropriateness; some stakeholders emphasise that food clubs are most effective for the 'squeezed middle' – those with low but stable incomes who require support to stretch their budgets.

However, there is a recognised limit to this role of food clubs. Because food clubs typically require a membership fee or a weekly payment, however small, they naturally exclude individuals or households who have no income for food. Most stakeholders, therefore, argue that the model cannot and should not replace food banks, as doing so would remove the safety net for the most vulnerable.

While the model is viable at a community level, questions remain regarding its scalability. Government and local authority officials interviewed noted that while individual clubs are valuable assets, their capacity limits, often capping membership to small numbers per venue, mean they cannot currently address population-level food insecurity without significant expansion of infrastructure and coverage.



*"They're a good thing, but if they can only have 50 people, then they're not having that bigger reach in our population of 1.2 million... Almost always they have a wait list of another 100 people. So where does everyone else go if you don't have enough food?"*

(Local authority policy lead)

However, there is an inherent tension in addressing these capacity limits. Expanding the size of individual clubs to accommodate more members risks diluting the welcoming, community-led environment that members value so highly, potentially making the experience more transactional. Therefore, scaling the model without losing its core relational benefits likely requires multiplying the number of small, hyperlocal clubs – expanding infrastructure rather than simply increasing the headcount at existing venues.

Achieving such coverage is particularly challenging in rural communities. Stakeholders highlight the difficulty of operating the food club model in rural areas due to a lack of community infrastructure (halls/venues), higher transport costs for food distribution, and lower population density, which makes the logistics of surplus food delivery less viable than in urban centres.

## 5.3 Operational factors enabling and constraining effectiveness



**Key insight:** Effectiveness requires a shift from ‘surplus-only’ to ‘hybrid’ supply, while sustainability depends on a clear financial split: member fees cover the food, while grants cover other expenses needed to sustain the food club.

The effectiveness of the food club model hinges on three critical operational factors: the food supply chain, staffing, and the physical venue. Operationally, the most significant recent shift observed among some clubs is a movement from a ‘surplus-only’ model to a ‘hybrid’ supply chain. Stakeholders argue that relying 100% on surplus food has become a constraint due to supply volatility. Consequently, many clubs are transitioning to purchasing core staples, such as meat, dairy, and fresh fruit, to supplement surplus stock. While this increases operational costs, it is viewed as a necessary enabler to ensure the reliability and quality required to retain members and to provide access to fresh, healthy and nutritious food.

However, such a move does threaten the sustainability of food clubs without the continued access to funding to pay for such food purchases. Thus, some stakeholders argue that food clubs need to aspire to achieve "*stock sustainability*", where income from membership payments and/or food sales covers the cost of the food itself, allowing grant funding to be reserved for overheads, staffing, and wrap-around support rather than "*subsidising the shopping bag*".

The workforce presents a similar tension between sustainability and effectiveness. While volunteers are often the backbone of the "*logistical shop floor operation*", stakeholders increasingly recognise that relying on unpaid time for the management of the food clubs as well as the holistic, wrap-around support is a risk. To ensure consistency and long-term sustainability of the support provided, several stakeholders argued that the food club workforce needs to be professionalised, with paid staff managing complex supply logistics and support duties, while volunteers handle more simple operations, such as handing out the food or restocking shelves – an approach already taken by some food clubs. However, this once again raises the question of funding.

Finally, the choice of venue is a powerful enabler of reach by addressing the psychological barriers to access. Several stakeholders argued that clubs located in ‘neutral’ community locations, such as schools or secular community centres, are often more effective at destigmatising the service than those operating out of religious buildings, making them more approachable for a wider demographic.

Distinct from these social barriers, there are also significant geographical and logistical limits to relying on single venues. To overcome these physical access barriers, partners outlined a future vision of 'hyperlocal' clusters. This approach involves establishing multiple smaller satellite clubs within a single community to reduce travel distances for members and maximise local reach. However, expanding the physical footprint in this way presents its own operational challenges.

For static venues, high rental costs and a lack of local cold storage infrastructure frequently remain significant constraints to scaling up. Furthermore, there is a risk of 'over-fragmentation': opening too many small clubs in a limited geographical area can dilute demand density and increase per-unit costs. Some food clubs address this challenge through the use of more centralised logistics and dispatching food in cooled trucks to pop-up community hubs.

## 5.4 Strategic alignment with local and national initiatives



**Key insight:** There is a critical mismatch between policy and practice: while government views food clubs as long-term preventative infrastructure, they are largely funded via short-term emergency grants, leaving them vulnerable to budget cuts.

Stakeholders recognised that there is currently a strong strategic alignment between the food club model and 'upstream' prevention agendas of local and national government. At the national level, the food club model is said to fit well with the government's manifesto commitment to end mass dependence on emergency food parcels. National policy makers see the model as a way to help "unlock personal autonomy" to tackle food insecurity, favouring interventions that build infrastructure and agency over direct charitable subsidies and food banks. Similarly, from a local authority perspective, food clubs are increasingly viewed not merely as food distribution points, but as core community assets. By building social connection and resilience, the model aligns with public health goals to tackle the root causes of health inequalities rather than just treating the symptoms.



*I don't think government should be creating social supermarkets... What we can do is play the role of bringing together the people who can create that. Can we do something around planning permissions? Can we do something around business rates? I think this is what government's role should be – in supporting this infrastructure to come in."*

(Government policy lead)

However, this alignment comes with a significant caveat. Several stakeholders expressed concern that institutionalising food clubs carries a moral risk: that government support for ‘better’ charitable infrastructure might become a substitute for addressing the root causes of income insufficiency. There is a fear that by making food aid more dignified and sustainable, the focus shifts away from the fundamental need to ensure wages and benefits are sufficient to cover living costs. As one stakeholder noted, the model must be seen as a complement to, not a replacement for, systemic income reforms.

Beyond this ideological tension, the financial reality of the model also remains precarious. While new funding avenues exist (such as the DWP’s £1 billion Crisis and Resilience Fund between April 2026 and March 2029<sup>6</sup>), because food support is often ‘discretionary’ spend for local authorities, clubs are vulnerable to local budget cuts. Furthermore, support varies wildly depending on the commitment and resources of individual councils. This means that while food clubs are positioned strategically as long-term preventative infrastructure, they are frequently funded through short-term, ad-hoc charitable grants or emergency ‘cost of living’ pots. Stakeholders argue that if food clubs are to be integrated into the social safety net, the funding model must shift from charitable grants to multi-year commissioning, similar to other preventative social care services.

## 5.5 Strengthening the investment case



**Key insight:** Building a stronger case for increased and sustainable investment in food clubs relies on strengthening the evidence base. This includes longitudinal evidence on the longer-term outcomes of such support and quantifying the ‘avoided costs’ to the NHS and social care systems.

To secure this transition to commissioned status, stakeholders identified a critical need for longitudinal evidence. While there is ample data showing that food clubs provide immediate financial relief, there is a ‘known unknown’ regarding exit pathways. The strongest argument for continued investment would be evidence demonstrating what proportion of members graduate from the clubs to financial independence, rather than cycling back into crisis or remaining permanently dependent on food club supply.

Additionally, stakeholders emphasised the need for health economic data that quantifies the ‘avoided costs’ to the NHS and social care systems. Proving that the social connection and nutritional support provided by food clubs directly reduces GP visits or diet-related illness would provide a more robust financial justification required to unlock statutory funding.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/1-billion-resilience-fund-and-next-step-towards-removal-of-two-child-limit-provide-safety-net-for-families>



## Irene's story: Eating more healthily and making friends

Irene is in her 70s and lives in Greater Manchester and has been visiting the food club every other week for around four years, after first hearing about it through a friend who lives nearby.

What appeals to her particularly is the value for money and variety of food on offer: *"I leave with three bags of shopping for £8.50 and you get a variety"*. Her diet and cooking have broadened. She now eats a wider range of fruit and vegetables and uses her air fryer to make chips and meat pies. She also often makes fruit salads. Without the club, she says, *"I wouldn't eat as much. I wouldn't eat as healthily."* She reports feeling better physically and losing weight.

The benefits ripple to the rest of her family. She takes what she needs and shares the rest with her recently divorced granddaughter and her two great-grandchildren, explaining: *"It's feeding two families."*

Living alone, she has *"made a lot of friends here... we text each other, we phone each other"* and coming feels *"like a special day out every fortnight."* Friends help carry bags to the car, and neighbours take them into the house. Her verdict is clear: *"I would recommend this to anyone."*

## 6. Conclusions and reflections

The *Nourish the Nation* programme set out to test the viability of food clubs as a way of addressing food insecurity. The evidence gathered throughout this evaluation, from the strategic views of national and local authority policymakers to the daily lived experiences of members in rural village halls and urban centres, points to a resounding conclusion: the model works. Food clubs have been shown to be highly effective interventions for households that are struggling but not yet destitute. As one funded partner described, if food banks are ‘the lifeboat’ for those already drowning, food clubs have successfully established themselves as the ‘life jacket’ that keeps households afloat.

Food clubs offer three layers of support, with affordable food the hook and anchor (Layer 1), and the environment (Layer 2) and the wrap-around support (Layer 3) helping to bring about other outcomes, including social links, greater financial stability and/or preventing members from slipping into greater food insecurity.

The evaluation has highlighted four specific areas where the programme has delivered exceptional value:

**Dignity and agency:** Food clubs have successfully engaged people who may never use a food bank. The payment of a fee has proven to be a key ingredient of success, shifting members from ‘recipients’ to ‘customers’ and restoring a sense of control and dignity.

**The ‘soft entry’ point:** The model succeeds in reaching people who often fall through the gaps of statutory services. We found that food clubs allow trusted relationships to build. This enables them to introduce sensitive wrap-around support, such as debt advice or housing help, to members who might be unlikely to access support from a Citizens Advice Bureau or a council office.

**The multiplier effect:** The benefits of the model ripple beyond the immediate household. We have seen evidence of increased community resilience, with members sharing food with neighbours and extended families, and some volunteers gaining a sense of purpose or the skills and confidence to re-enter the workforce.

**Strategic alignment:** The food club model aligns closely with national and local policy in many areas. It is increasingly recognised not just as a charity project, but for its potential to serve as important social infrastructure that relieves pressure on the NHS and other statutory services.

However, success brings its own challenges. The evaluation has also identified that the model is currently navigating a tension between inclusivity (reaching the most vulnerable) and sustainability (covering costs). Based on the findings of this report, we offer the following reflections for partners and funders to consider as the model evolves to a more sustainable, national standard.

**Funded partners** have successfully established the infrastructure over the last few years; they may now need to consider how to refine operations to ensure financial resilience and deeper inclusivity, by:

- **Moving towards ‘stock sustainability’:** The tension between affordability and sustainability invites a reflection on financial models. There is growing evidence that a ‘stock sustainability’ model, where member contributions cover the wholesale cost of food purchasing, offers a pathway to greater stability. This would allow external grant funding to be ring-fenced for the ‘value-added’ elements, such as professional staffing and wrap-around support, rather than paying for the purchase of food in some clubs.
- **Diversifying supply for inclusion:** Reflecting on inclusivity, the ‘hybrid’ purchasing model offers a pathway to serve diverse communities. Moving beyond generic surplus towards buying more specific cultural staples (e.g. halal meats, specific grains) could help to remove the dietary barriers that currently exclude some groups.
- **Allowing more flexibility for working families:** The identified barrier for some working families who cannot attend during the day, suggests there is value for partners to extend their offer of evening or weekend collection slots, where possible. This would help the model reach the growing demographic of full-time workers facing food insecurity.
- **Considering the potential of ‘hyperlocal clustering’:** To address transport barriers in rural areas or large urban districts, the ‘cluster’ model presents a possible solution – operating multiple smaller satellite distributions from a single central hub to bring provision closer to members’ homes.

**For Comic Relief and Sainsbury's** there is an opportunity to support the long-term viability of the sector by:

- **Facilitating 'hybrid' supply chains:** Sainsbury's and other food retailers are uniquely placed to support the operational shift from 'surplus-only' to 'hybrid' models and to explore offering 'cost-price' purchasing channels for core staples (fresh fruit, vegetables, dairy). This would allow food clubs to stock healthy, consistent produce without paying full retail prices, significantly improving their financial sustainability.
- **Advocating for commissioning:** There is a strategic opportunity to advocate for food clubs as statutory 'social infrastructure' – without ignoring the need for policy changes further up the chain to reduce the reliance of some families on food clubs and other aid in the first place. Supporting partners to build the business case for multi-year local authority commissioning would help ensure food clubs are embedded into the national social safety net going forward.

**For future evaluation** to unlock the statutory funding mentioned above, the evidence base needs to evolve from measuring 'reach' to measuring 'value'. This could be done by:

- **Tracking 'exit pathways' of food club members:** The critical missing link in the investment case is understanding what happens when members leave. Future evaluations would benefit from tracking cohorts of leavers over 6–12 months to determine if they have 'graduated' to financial independence or cycled back into crisis.
- **Exploring the feasibility of economic valuation:** While there is a strategic need to quantify the 'avoided costs' to the NHS and social care systems to encourage more investment in the sector, the feasibility of such studies remains complex. Robust economic evaluation requires sensitive personal data, which funded partners may be reluctant to collect for fear of compromising the low-barrier, non-intrusive nature of the service. Future evaluation efforts should therefore focus on exploring the feasibility of these approaches – perhaps through small-scale pilots or the use of proxy measures – rather than imposing heavy data requirements that risk undermining the trust at the heart of the member experience.
- **Balancing metrics with 'stories of change':** While economic data is vital, the 'softer' outcomes – family routines, dignity, social inclusion, community resilience – remain central to the user experience. It remains crucial therefore that future evaluations continue to use participatory methods to ensure these human outcomes are not lost in the pursuit of hard metrics.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Overview of food club sites visited

### **Feeding Britain**

- Knightswood (Glasgow West End)
- CHAT in MidDevon (Tiverton)
- Bonny Downs (Newham, East London)

### **FoodSavers Network**

- Darley Street Market and 22 Shaw House (Bradford)
- Pudsey (Leeds)

### **The Bread and Butter Thing**

- Old Leake (Boston)
- St. Peter's Church (Salford)

## Appendix 2: List of stakeholders interviewed

Name/Organisation	Stakeholder category
Dr Megan Blake – University of Sheffield	Subject matter Expert/academic researcher
Nick Hopkins – Independent researcher	Subject matter Expert/academic researcher
Andrew Forsey – Feeding Britain	Funded partner
Juli Thompson – CEO, FoodSavers Network	Funded partner
Vic Harper – The Bread and Butter Thing	Funded partner
Shona Goudie – Food Foundation	Food security organisation
Polly Jones – Trussell	Food security organisation & funded partner
Ellie Malhotra – Your Local Pantry	Food security organisation
DWP policy maker*	Policy official
DEFRA policy maker*	Policy official
Local Authority strategic lead*	Policy official

\* These stakeholders asked to remain anonymous and not be named in the report

## Appendix 3: Overview of quantitative data

### Overview of programme data

Comic Relief collects programme-level data from all three funded partners on a bi-annual basis and collates it centrally. The data comprises 16 pre-defined indicators covering both programme reach and member outcomes. Specifically, these indicators capture:

- Reach of the programme (e.g., number of adults and children reached)
- Programme activity (e.g., meals distributed)
- Self-reported improvements in food security and dietary behaviour
- Self-reported social connectedness
- Income gains

Data collection was not fully standardised across funded partners, and sources varied between organisations. The list below summarises the data sources used for the indicators included in this report.

**Table 1. Data sources and calculation by indicators and funded partner**

Indicator	Feeding Britain	The Bread and Butter Thing	FoodSavers Network
Number of people that have been provided with access to affordable, diverse and nutritious food	Based on all clubs, but relative to the funding received for this programme	Based on the number of food clubs opened using this programme's funding	Based on all food clubs
Number of children aged 0-4 that have been provided with access to affordable, diverse and nutritious food	Based on annual member survey and the information from first indicator	Based on annual member survey and the information from first indicator	N/A
Number of children aged 5-17 that have been provided with access to affordable, diverse and nutritious food			

Indicator	Feeding Britain	The Bread and Butter Thing	FoodSavers Network
Number of meals' worth of affordable, diverse and nutritious food distributed by the funded partners	Based on annual member survey	Based on monitoring of weight (calculation how many meals this equates to)	Based on monitoring of number of bags (calculation about how many meals this equate to)
Weight of food redistributed through the services rather than going to waste (Tonnes)	Based on coordinator survey	Based on weight of surplus food	N/A
% of people reporting that they have a healthier diet as a result of using the services	Based on annual member survey	Based on annual member survey	N/A
% of people reporting that they are cooking at home more frequently since using the services	Based on annual member survey	Based on annual member survey	N/A
% of people reporting reduced use of food banks since using the services	Based on annual member survey	Based on annual member survey	N/A
% of people reporting that they are less worried about being able to afford food since using the services	Based on annual member survey	Based on annual member survey	Based on member survey
% of people reporting that they are skipping meals less frequently since using the services	Based on annual member survey	Based on annual member survey	N/A
Number of people who are engaging with/receiving support from wraparound services, eg. cooking and nutrition activities, social hubs, benefits/debt/energy/housing advice, membership of a Credit Union, etc.	Based on annual member survey	Based on annual member survey	N/A
% of people who feel more connected to their community and/or less socially isolated because of the services	Based on annual member survey	Based on annual member survey	N/A
Number of food clubs supported by the programme	New food clubs opened in reporting period	New food clubs opened in reporting period	New food clubs opened in reporting period

Where survey questions aligned sufficiently across funded partners, we aggregated the data. Where questions differed substantially, results are reported separately.

Please note that some survey questions were revised across reporting rounds. In most cases, we used the most recent version for analysis. However, in one instance we reverted to an earlier version, as it more closely aligned with the phrasing used by another funded partner.

A proportion of the indicator data outlined above was drawn from member surveys administered by the funded partners. In addition to the core indicators, these surveys captured further relevant information, some of which has been used to supplement and contextualise other findings. This included:

**Feeding Britain:** Survey of nearly 3,000 members across their network of food clubs in 2025. We drew on data from the following survey questions/items:

- I/we have eaten more fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Since your household has starting using this service, have they supported you/your household in accessing the following services?
- Since your household has starting using this service, have they supported you/your household in accessing information or support on the following topics?

**FoodSavers Network:** One-off survey of 174 members in June 2025 in Bradford. Items included in the report are:

- Like talking to pantry staff
- Life improved with pantry
- Pantry solves food access

**The Bread and Butter Thing:** Annual survey of over 8500 members in 2025. We drew on data from the following survey items in this evaluation report:

- Bread and Butter helps me save money on buying food
- As a result of using The Bread and Butter Thing I eat more fruit and vegetables
- As a result of using The Bread and Butter Thing I have made friends
- As a result of using The Bread and Butter Thing I have tried new foods

## Appendix 4: Rapid evidence review

### User experience and impact of food clubs in the UK

Food clubs represent an alternative model to traditional food banks that aims to provide dignified food access whilst addressing food insecurity. The evidence base, whilst growing, remains limited with significant gaps in peer-reviewed literature.

#### 1. Context: The need for food clubs in addressing UK food insecurity

Food insecurity has emerged as a critical public health challenge in the UK, with recent data revealing the scale and severity of the crisis. Before examining the evidence, it is important to note that **'food insecurity'** is defined and measured differently across studies and organisations, which can lead to apparent inconsistencies in reported statistics. The World Food Summit's widely adopted definition describes food security as existing 'when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (cited in FSA, 2024, p.31). However, organisations use different measurement tools and thresholds when operationalising this concept. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) employs the US Adult Food Security Survey Module, which categorises households as either 'food secure' (including those with 'marginal food security' who may experience anxiety about food access) or 'food insecure' (including 'low' and 'very low' food security). Meanwhile, other studies may use broader measures of 'hunger and hardship' that capture financial struggles with food costs alongside actual food access problems. Consequently, it is possible for households to experience food-related difficulties whilst still being classified as 'food secure' under certain measurement frameworks, and readers should interpret statistics with awareness of these definitional variations.

According to the Department for Work and Pensions Family Resources Survey, 7.2 million people in the UK reported food insecurity in 2022/23, rising sharply from 4.7 million in 2021/22 (DWP, 2024). For 3.7 million people, this meant skipping meals or going hungry due to lack of income to afford food (Francis-Devine, 2024). The Food Foundation's data from June 2024 shows that 13.6% of UK households experienced food insecurity, with families and children particularly vulnerable (Food Foundation, 2024). Indeed, the demographics of food insecurity reveal stark inequalities. Families with three or more children experience the highest rates of poverty, with 25% living in hunger and hardship according to 2022/23 data (DWP, 2024). Households with disabled people face disproportionate challenges, with 47% experiencing some form of hunger and hardship – only 84% of them are classified as 'food secure' compared with 94% of other households (DEFRA, 2024). Single parent families are particularly affected, with 32% facing hunger and hardship compared to 16% of couples with children (WPI Economics, 2024).

The traditional response to rising food insecurity has been the expansion of food banks, which have distributed millions of emergency food parcels since the implementation of austerity policies. However, evidence demonstrates that this approach has proved both ineffective and unsustainable in addressing the underlying crisis. Despite the proliferation of food banks, food insecurity has continued to rise, with data from both the DWP and Food Standards Agency confirming that food parcel distribution has not reduced overall levels of food poverty (DWP, 2024; FSA, 2024).

Critically, recent data reveals that just 14% of households reporting severe food insecurity access a food bank, indicating significant barriers to this form of support (DWP, 2024). These barriers include the stigma associated with accepting charity, fear of social services intervention where children are involved, and the limited choice offered by pre-packed parcels of predominantly donated or surplus food (Thompson et al., 2018; Garthwaite, 2016). Food bank teams report being overstretched and overwhelmed by demand, whilst facing declining donations and dwindling surplus food supplies (IFAN, 2024).

In response to these limitations, a new model of dignified food provision has emerged over the past five years aiming to offer more dignity to its users than traditional food banks. Affordable food clubs – including pantries, social supermarkets, and larders – offer an alternative approach that addresses many of the shortcomings of traditional food aid. These clubs usually operate on three key principles: members make a financial contribution, food is made available at low cost, and provision takes the form of groceries rather than pre-prepared meals (Lopez et al., 2025).

By 2023, it was estimated that 5% of the UK population had used a social supermarket in the past year (FSA, 2024) with regional variations ranging from 3% to 11% depending on the area. The Feeding Britain network alone supports over 130 regional and local anti-hunger partnerships, which include more than 410 Affordable Food Clubs serving 91,000 households across the UK (Lopez et al., 2025). The Bread and Butter Thing, another major provider, supports 131 communities across 27 local authorities, demonstrating the rapid expansion of the food club model (The Bread and Butter Thing, 2025); while the FoodSavers Network ran by Inn Churches runs 28 food clubs across various locations in Yorkshire, providing high quality fresh and store cupboard food for a low weekly membership fee (FoodSavers, 2024). Other food clubs include Your Local Pantry (about 120 sites), Message Trust Community Groceries (around 25 sites), Family Action Food Clubs (about 30), and SOFEA Community Larders (around 40 sites).

These clubs take various forms, from pop-up pantries in church halls to ‘social supermarkets’ (i.e. retail outlet that sells food and essential goods at reduced prices to people experiencing financial difficulties)<sup>7</sup>. What unites them is their shared purpose of tackling food insecurity whilst preserving dignity through choice and payment. Evidence reveals significant variation in food club models across the UK. The Edinburgh Food Provision research (2024) found that of 17 food pantry services surveyed, the most common access model was open access (53%), followed by membership models (41%). Other models identified in the literature (Lopez et al., 2025; Saxena et al., 2022; Ziauddeen et al., 2025); include:

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<sup>7</sup> see: <https://feedingbritain.org/social-supermarkets-the-new-normal/>

- **Membership models with geographic restrictions:** Some clubs restrict membership to specific postcodes or areas.
- **Multi-site models:** Some pantries operate across multiple locations, allowing members to access different sites on different days, with new rural multi-site models emerging.
- **Mobile provision:** Mobile food clubs operating from converted buses or vans.
- **Partnership models:** Some food clubs partner with food banks or support organisations to ensure people accessing crisis services receive ongoing support.

Based on the available evidence, food clubs across the UK operate various costing models. The Welsh Community Food Co-ops evaluation (BMG Research, 2012) reported that clubs typically charge small, fixed fees, generally £2.50 or £3.00 per bag of fruit, vegetables and salad, with no membership fee required – although that was over 10 years ago. Similar models are documented elsewhere, with The Bread and Butter Thing charging £8.50 per visit and the FoodSavers Network charging a weekly membership fee of around £6. The Essex Community Supermarkets evaluation (Roussos et al., 2024) found that clubs offer baskets of goods at 30-40% less than traditional supermarkets, with no means testing required.

Food clubs distinguish themselves not merely through their retail and costing model but through their holistic approach to addressing food insecurity. Club members often participate in additional activities or services through their club, including accessing support on welfare rights and debt advice, health checks, cooking and nutrition workshops, and social activities (Lopez et al., 2025). The FoodSavers Network gives food club members the opportunity to save in a recognised Credit Union scheme. Such wraparound support addresses the contextual drivers of food insecurity – particularly income volatility and social isolation – rather than simply providing temporary relief from hunger. The positioning of food clubs as community hubs aim to create stigma-free environments where those facing food insecurity can access broader support networks.

The need for food clubs must be understood within the broader context of inadequate incomes and rising living costs. Many users include people in work whose wages fail to cover basic expenses, as well as those receiving full social security entitlements that remain insufficient to make ends meet (DEFRA, 2024; IFAN, 2024). In this landscape where nutritious food is increasingly out of reach, food clubs bridge the gap between emergency food aid and conventional retail, offering a model that aims to uphold dignity whilst addressing immediate need and connecting members to services that tackle underlying causes of poverty.

## 2. User experience

The evidence on user experiences of food clubs in the UK reveals consistent themes around **dignity, choice and social connection**. Ziauddeen et al. (2025) provide qualitative insights in a peer reviewed journal article from 11 food club users in Southern England (as well as quantitative evidence of impact), finding that participants valued the choice and dignity offered by food clubs compared to food banks. However, whilst choice is valued, it is sometimes constrained by what surplus food is available.

The Feeding Britain team has produced two significant reports on this topic. Lopez et al. (2024) in their "Feeding Hope" report provided initial evidence from 2,460 members across 68 Affordable Food Clubs, establishing that these clubs 'bridge the gap between food aid and conventional supermarkets' and offer 'users the dignity of choice and of payment' (p.4). Lopez et al. (2025) expanded this evidence base in their latest report with survey data from 2,298 food club members across 72 UK clubs, confirming that members particularly valued being positioned as shoppers rather than charity recipients. The 2025 report concludes that the affordable food club model preserves people's sense of dignity and freedom – to choose their own items from a wide selection of fresh, chilled, frozen, long-life and household goods, and to pay a manageable fee for them.

The Saxena et al. (2022) evaluation of the Community Food Hub in Foleshill (which forms part of the Feeding Britain network) provides further evidence about the lived experiences of users. Members described their engagement using overwhelmingly positive language: 'rewarding, enjoyable, most valuable, great, amazing, satisfying, boosting confidence, becoming more confident, feeling part of a 'family', a strong team' (p.61). This language reflects not just satisfaction with the service but a deep sense of belonging and personal growth that extends beyond mere food provision.

In contrast, the Ranta et al. (2024) study provides particularly valuable comparative evidence on user experiences of food banks versus social supermarkets. Of 111 members surveyed, 41.4% had previously used food banks, allowing direct comparison of experiences. Food bank experiences were described in stark negative terms, with users reporting them as: 'Horrible. Really humiliating. Yeah, awful!' and highlighting their restrictive nature: 'you could only go 6 times and then you'd have to go back to your GP or a health visitor and stuff like that' (p.12).

As reported by Roussos et al. (2024), shoppers using the Essex Community Supermarkets (CSM) emphasised that 'they value the freedom that entering a 'regular' shop brings, coupled with the feeling of being in charge of what enters their shopping basket' (p.19). This sentiment emerged repeatedly without prompting from researchers, with shoppers spontaneously contrasting their CSM experience unfavourably to other forms of food aid. The report notes that 'in the most extreme cases, we have heard that when shoppers in the past would have needed to access food aid, they would often avoid it due to the perceived social stigma attached to it' (p.19). The significance of choice and control emerges strongly, with the report explaining that while other forms of food aid and charity offer important support to people in need, 'this is often experienced as demeaning and shameful' (p.19).

However, it is worth noting that according to the study by Ranta et al. (2024), stigma persists even for some food club users. Thus, members at one social supermarket expressed concerns about visibility, with one noting: 'I have told two friends but I still would not feel like it's something I would want to broadcast really. I don't know why, like I say there's no shame or stigma at the [social supermarket] but I would still feel a little bit insecure, judged' (p.12). This suggests that whilst food clubs reduce stigma compared to food banks, broader societal attitudes towards food support may continue to affect user experiences.

Very few studies explore the practical barriers to accessing food clubs. One exception is the study by Saxena et al. (2022) of the Foleshill Community Food Hub. It found that language barriers posed a significant challenge for the diverse local community, with 'limited staff capacity and language barriers (...), especially with the non-English speaking members in the local community of Foleshill' (p.13). Despite efforts to increase inclusivity, the evaluation found that 'the availability of food that meets specific dietary needs and cultural preferences has improved but continues to be limited in variety' (p.13).



## Evidence gaps

There is virtually no published research on systematic feedback mechanisms and safeguarding practices. There is also limited evidence on the barriers to accessing food clubs particularly for non-English speaking members or minoritised communities. The sector lacks large-scale, longitudinal research that could provide robust evidence on how user experiences evolve over time.

### 3. Impact and outcomes

The evidence base on food club impacts has been significantly strengthened by recent quantitative studies, demonstrating consistent positive outcomes across multiple dimensions, as well as qualitative evidence to provide details on how food clubs help to achieve such outcomes. The most direct measured impact of food clubs is on household food security and dietary quality. Multiple reports demonstrate significant improvements in these core outcomes – although the scale of measured outcomes differ significantly.

Ziauddeen et al. (2025) found that **food insecurity** reduced from 68% to 30% over three months among food club users. The Bread and Butter Thing (2025) reports 93% of members saving money on food purchases, with 68% able to afford feeding their families for the week ahead. Lopez et al. (2025) report a link between length of membership and levels of food insecurity. Among those who had joined within the last three months, 52% said they always or often worried about running out of food due to a lack of money. This compares to 30% of members who had been part of a food club for more than two years. It also found a noticeable reduction in the use of food banks among members. The 2024 and 2025 surveys found average savings of around £18 per visit (£18.06 in the 2024 survey and £18.19 in the 2025 survey; Lopez et al., 2024; 2025) with over £800 savings annually per household. Savings were even higher for larger families, with 20% of families with three or more children saving £30 or more per visit (Lopez et al., 2024). Similar findings were reported by the Norfolk Community Foundation (2021), with members saving approximately 40% on their weekly shop, translating to £15-18 weekly or £780-936 annually.

Finally, a social return on investment analysis of the CSM model by Roussos et al. (2024) calculated that every £1 invested generated £15.77 in social value, with 100% of 1,285 shoppers experiencing increased financial comfort.

As regards impact on **dietary quality**, evidence consistently shows improved fruit and vegetable consumption. Lopez et al. (2025) found 77% of members eating more fruit and vegetables, whilst 76% were cooking more at home. Ziauddeen et al. (2025) reported similar findings but at lower levels, with diet quality improvements in 47% of participants, with specific increases in fruit and vegetable consumption driven by clubs' requirement to select five portions per visit. Saxena et al. (2022) found members experienced increased consumption of different types of food and 'increased confidence in cooking new dishes', while the Bread and Butter Thing (2025) data shows 79% of members accessing better food than they could otherwise afford. Similarly, Mulrooney et al. (2023) found that social supermarkets 'introduced members to novel foods and dishes, potentially diversifying dietary intakes' (p.2108), with members reporting ability to prepare healthier meals.

The **community-building role** is strongly evidenced in both Feeding Britain reports. Lopez et al. (2024) found that 74% of members reported improved wellbeing since joining (p.8), with one member stating: 'Friendship brings me here. (...) People will help you here. And that's what it's all about' (p.8). The 2025 report (Lopez et al., 2025) expanded on these findings, with 84% of members reporting feeling more connected to their community since joining their club, and 78% experiencing improved wellbeing, rising to 88% among those saving more than £30 per shop. Several other studies show food clubs creating networks of mutual support. Saxena et al. (2022) found members describing their experience as becoming part of a 'family', with growth in member-volunteers creating virtuous cycles of support. The social aspects appear integral to positive outcomes, not merely supplementary. The Roussos et al. (2024) evaluation captures how CSMs function as 'community connectors' (p.18). One shopper explained: 'I feel closer to the community now than I did before. I feel like people know me a bit better' (p.18).

The Bread and Butter Thing's 2024 impact data provides further evidence of the community-building role, with 99% of their members saying the food clubs are good for the community, 97% feeling welcome at their food clubs, and 70% saying that since joining they feel more involved with the community (The Bread and Butter Thing, 2025). The social impact is particularly striking, with almost two-thirds (58%) of members saying they feel less alone since joining, and members reporting they have made friends through the service. As one member noted: '[The] Bread and Butter community do not judge and made me and my family feel welcomed from the start of me attending' (The Bread and Butter Thing, 2025).

Related to this, Ziauddeen et al. (2025) reported that 63% of food club members showed **wellbeing improvements** using the validated WEMWBS measure, with low wellbeing reducing from 54.1% to 29.7%. Study participants described looking forward to food club visits not only for food access but for social interaction with other users, staff and volunteers. One participant said: 'I always feel happier after I've been there and I've had a chat and (...) I've sorted out my meals for the week (...). Just a bit of relief' (p.11).

The integration of additional services emerges as a **key mechanism for impact**. Lopez et al. (2025) found 69% of members accessing wraparound support, averaging 2.3 different activities. Engagement was higher among families (76%) and in established clubs operating five or more years. The Bread and Butter Thing (2025) brought 214 organisations into hubs offering advice on energy, debt and other issues. As noted above, a key factor of the FoodSavers Network is the provision of access to Credit Unions – and the resulting positive impact on members’ financial security. Saxena et al. (2022) highlight the preventative element of wraparound support, particularly the integration with the Coventry Independent Advice Service. These were said to create opportunities for both formal and informal support, with a ‘preventative element where members’ concerns are being dealt with before their escalation to the crisis stage’ (p.61). Similarly, Lopez et al. (2025) found that members receiving financial advice were 60% more likely to report improved wellbeing, suggesting wraparound services can amplify core benefits.



### Evidence gaps

Despite strengthening evidence, significant gaps remain. The sector lacks standardised outcome metrics, making cross-study comparison difficult. There is limited evidence on differential impacts across population groups, health outcomes beyond self-reported wellbeing, and causal mechanisms underlying observed improvements. The absence of control groups in most studies limits ability to attribute outcomes definitively to food club interventions.

## 4. Relevance and sustainability

Evidence on sustainability raises some concerns. Both Feeding Britain reports found that most food clubs had been operating for an average of only three years, with just 24% operating for five years or more. The Edinburgh Food Provision research (2024) found that only 5 of 38 organisations had funding in place for all planned services for 2025/26, with 11 having no confirmed funding. Similarly, the Welsh Community Food Co-ops evaluation (BMG Research, 2012) found that sustainability depended heavily on volunteer commitment and continued funding support. The Edinburgh research (2024) identified interest in social enterprise approaches as alternatives to grant dependency. It also identified heavy reliance on food donations from various organisations including FareShare, with items varying week to week. Ziauddeen et al. (2025) noted that during the cost-of-living crisis, ‘as the cost-of-living crisis developed the volume of food purchased by the food clubs themselves increased and became the most common source of supply’ (p.3). The Lopez et al. (2025) report is clear about the limitations of the model within the broader policy context: ‘They must never be a substitute for the welfare state, nor will they alone be capable of addressing the structural causes of poverty, such as low wages and high housing costs’ (p.17).

Instead, it positions food clubs as ‘providing practical support that helps people to eat well, feel part of their community, and connect with wider services. By offering ongoing, community-led support through difficult times and beyond, they point toward a more sustainable, preventative and dignified model of local provision’ (p.17).

The Saxena et al. (2022) evaluation positions the Foleshill Community Food Hub as highly relevant to current policy contexts, demonstrating effective alignment with broader strategies to address food poverty by going ‘beyond a somewhat simplistic narrative of food provisioning to acknowledging food poverty/security as symptomatic of underlying, deeper individual and societal problems of poverty, poor mental and physical health, and social isolation’ (p.111). However, financial sustainability emerged as the paramount challenge, with the Operations Manager noting ‘a big shift in the amount of money we needed to spend on food as opposed to the amount of income we're getting from the social supermarket... we're actually getting less income in and we're spending more’ (p.89).

The Roussos et al. (2024) programme demonstrated financial sustainability through leveraging additional funding: ‘an ECC [Essex County Council] investment of £304,000 to date has leveraged an additional £436,000 in funding from partners’ (p.1). The expansion from two pilot sites to nine CSMs with plans for all 12 districts indicates successful scaling and sustainability.



## Evidence gaps

There is extremely limited published evidence on ways of achieving operational sustainability, and on volunteer retention, infrastructure requirements, or strategic positioning within welfare systems. The relationship between food clubs and broader poverty alleviation strategies remains underexplored.

## Conclusions

The available evidence suggests that food clubs appear to address several limitations of traditional food banks, particularly issues of dignity and choice. The transactional model, wraparound services and the community-building role appear to be key mechanisms of success that focus on creating fundamentally different dynamics than emergency food aid. However, questions remain about long-term sustainability and whether food clubs can address root causes of food insecurity. Also, the evidence base remains quite limited. Most findings come from just a handful of studies, with significant gaps in understanding user experiences over time, long-term impacts and organisational sustainability.

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