

DEMOS

# THE POWER OF FOOD

COMMUNITY  
EXPERIENCES OF  
TACKLING FOOD  
INSECURITY

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Rose Lasko-Skinner  
Maiyora Jeyabraba

# FOREWORD: HOW CAN WE WORK TOGETHER TO PUT FOOD ON EVERY TABLE?

As we welcome the much-awaited part II of the National Food Strategy, we want to start a conversation about the power of food and the role of food producers in delivering a food system that leaves no one behind. Maintaining a secure supply of food is essential to feeding the nation. We have commissioned this report to help put British food back at the heart of our society at a time when it's most needed.

## **A DICHOTOMY THAT MUST BE FIXED**

On one hand we are among the most affordable nations in the world for food, and on the other we have seen a year-on-year increase in the use of foodbanks. British food must be at the forefront of fixing that dichotomy. Now is the time for British food producers and food society to come forward and help the government in delivering a food strategy that is built on a sustainable, secure and trusted supply of food for all, produced to world-class standards.

With the economic and social pressures created by Brexit and Covid, access to food will become one of our nation's biggest challenges. If we cannot find a solution to labour (over half of the poultry meat workforce is non-UK) and trade (the value of our exports has an effect on UK prices) then we run the risk of creating a two-tier food system with the average citizen forced to rely on imported food. A National Food Strategy must prevent the creation of a two-tier food system, in which only the affluent

can afford to eat British food produced to British standards. From a customer in a supermarket, a patient in hospital, a child in school, to someone who needs help from a charity or foodbank, everyone should have the privilege of eating British.

British farmers have worked incredibly hard to build a food system that enhances British food values and guarantees world class standards of production from farm to fork. The Food Strategy's recommendations present an opportunity for us as a nation to bolster the heart of Britain's food supply and secure it for generations to come.

## **FOOD BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER**

The UK is brilliant at food and farming; climate, skills, resources, attitude, and infrastructure mean that we have world-class production standards turning out high quality food, not least in poultry meat. We should be at the forefront of feeding our citizens, but we sometimes forget what our products mean at a human level. From the pleasure of a Sunday lunch, the school meals that feed the minds of our young people, the shared meals that bring people together, and too often the life-saving hot meal for those who need it most.

As a food sector, an industry, we should never be separate from society even if occasionally we lose sight of our social purpose. Food is an integral part of our lives and our communities. It should remain affordable, available and accessible across society

and at standards that everyone deserves, whether they have the luxury of choice or not. Food is about health, jobs, security, social cohesion, mobility, opportunities, trade, circular economy, sustainability and wellbeing; but most of all it is about people, our people, all of whom deserve safe, wholesome and nutritious British food.

## **HUNGER MUST NOT BE NORMALISED**

Everyday people go to bed hungry; parents make the choice to forego a meal, so their children don't have to; a school dinner is the only hot food that some kids get; more of us are driven to use food banks; and in-work poverty is challenging the affordability of even basic food. This is not, and should never be, normal.

In hunger there has emerged a strong charitable sector within communities. This is populated by a lot of amazing people and organisations, all doing fantastic work; not just in ensuring hungry people eat, but in providing a gateway to services such as financial or mental health support. Hunger is currently being abandoned to whatever charities and community groups can achieve. While these organisations are doing some wonderful work, every single one of them would happily cease to exist if their services were no longer needed.

**Richard Griffiths, Chief Executive,  
British Poultry Council**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Ensuring access to good quality food is an essential part of eradicating food insecurity long-term.**

- People who are food insecure place significant value on what they eat, in particular the quality and nutritional value, although they often have to compromise quality and health in order to meet their costs. In our open access survey of people vulnerable to food insecurity we found the top three values were:
  - Quality
  - Health
  - Cost
- When able to access good quality food, respondents explained how it had immediate and positive impacts on their quality of life, mental health, self-worth and confidence - in addition to their physical health. As a result, the standard and quality of food this group is able to access has a significant impact on their capacity to make long-term changes to their lives and become more resilient.
- In addition to personal capacity, food plays an important role in family and social lives and can be an important mechanism for people to build relationships with new people. Without being able to access good ingredients or good food, many are at risk of further isolation and being disconnected from other services that can provide a pathway out of food insecurity. By contrast, the capacity to meet new people and build social networks can have profound effects on people's quality of life and resilience.

**Protecting the UK food system, including current food standards, is essential in preventing further inequity in the food system.**

- People who are vulnerable to food insecurity are on the frontline of changes or shocks in the food system.

- Too often this group has to make compromises on health and standards in order to eat. It is likely that further shocks or changes to the food system will create more acute forms of food insecurity if not well managed.
- In the future, changes to the quality and standard of food could seriously hamper their ability to access good food. This is particularly concerning given our findings on how access to good quality food is often the key to encouraging people to access other services that can make them more resilient long-term.

**Current government support for people facing food insecurity, while providing a lifeline to people in crisis, too often fails to provide a pathway out of food insecurity.**

- Government support during the pandemic provided a vital lifeline to those experiencing food insecurity, but too often failed to provide them with healthy or good quality food.
  - Many respondents in our open access survey who received government assistance described eating poor quality food or unhealthy food, or simply not receiving enough food and skipping meals as a result.
  - Receiving poor quality food through government schemes or emergency food provision often made respondents in our open access survey feel worthless and disempowered.
  - Most respondents to our survey that received Universal Credit often struggled to make their payments cover their rent, bills and food, finding themselves having to compromise on quality or health in order to make ends meet. They often relied on community groups to help make their money go further.

Community groups have developed a model that uniquely tackles both food insecurity and the systemic issues that drive food insecurity at the same time.

- The community groups, which respondents were part of, were set up to tackle food insecurity. The groups are aimed at improving access to healthier food through discounted prices or helping them shift their behaviour to eat better.
- In addition to providing food, community groups deliver - or link users up with - other support services (such as employment support or mental health training) that provide a pathway for users to become more food secure long-term. The food is the initial pull to get people interested in the community groups that then encourage users to try other services - in effect demonstrating the importance of a 'food first' approach to tackling food insecurity long-term.
- The community groups we worked with were often successful in supporting users to make longer-term changes because of the positive relationships they were able to build with their users.
- Overall, we find this 'food first' approach has three key 'dividends' for users and communities:
  - a. Improves diet and health. It helps users immediately access better quality and healthier food that would have been out of their budget or unavailable in their local area in a more dignified and empowering way. This can, overnight, enable users and their families to have a healthier and more nutritious diet.
  - b. Improves mental health and confidence. The atmosphere created by community groups, where the users are empowered and in better control of their diet, creates the perfect platform for people to build their confidence and improve their mental health. Some groups also provide mental health or resilience training on site, which directly helps users build up their capacity.
  - c. Improves resilience and social infrastructure. These spaces can also provide people with a platform to meet and bond with others in their local community. This is vital for tackling food insecurity given the close correlation between food insecurity and isolation. In addition, the groups also either provide other services on site, or directly link people up with other services that they might have previously not known or heard about, helping them find a pathway out of food insecurity.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation 1:** The government should pilot a local Food Ladder Strategy.

**Recommendation 2:** The government should set up a Community Infrastructure Grant for developing social infrastructure, such as community hubs and spaces for food groups to use.

**Recommendation 3:** The next Spending Review should assess the capacity to ring-fence public health spending for community groups that safeguard access to healthy food for local communities.

**Recommendation 4:** National and local policymakers should take a 'Food First' approach to tackling food insecurity.

**Recommendation 5:** Local governments and public sector organisations should pilot alternative ways of procuring food services and community food programmes that follow a Community Wealth Building approach (CWB). Part of this should include creating jobs for people at risk of food insecurity who are looking for work.

**Recommendation 6:** HM Treasury should make the £20-a-week increase in Universal Credit permanent.

**Recommendation 7:** The Department for Work and Pensions should review the potential to make more third-party support and guidance available to people accessing the benefits system to prevent hardship as a result of benefits going unclaimed.

**Recommendation 8:** The Department for Work and Pensions should pilot a peer-to-peer support incentive scheme in conjunction with Universal Credit.

# INTRODUCTION

The debate on food insecurity is stuck. Attempts to tackle the problem by national policymakers have traditionally focused on direct food provision or raising income levels, and neither approach has worked: long before Covid-19, the UK had one of the highest rates of food insecurity in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

As we come out of the pandemic, there is a clear need to change tack. The National Food Strategy has made a series of recommendations to the government, some of which - with the campaigning of the footballer, Marcus Rashford - have come into force. As the end of the Universal Credit uplift in September looms, Conservative MPs in the Blue Wall have called for ministers to do more to prevent hunger in their constituencies. Yet relatively little is understood about the experiences of people vulnerable to food insecurity, how those experiences interact with the wider food system in the UK, and how they can inform strategies to end it.

This report seeks to change that. Supported by the British Poultry Council, our goal has been to explore how the food system in the UK can become more secure for the most vulnerable consumers, and to better understand the experiences of people who are food insecure in order to build a more effective approach to reducing food insecurity long-term. We partnered with three community groups or social enterprises who work to improve local access to healthy and nutritious food, Bags of Taste, The Bread and Butter Thing (TBBT) and Community Shop, to reach 300 of their members who are at risk of food insecurity. We asked them about their experiences of food - including their preferences and values in the food system, and what they perceive as the most important barriers and enablers to them and others becoming more food secure.

For most of us, food is about more than calories and nutrition. We find that those who are food insecure are no different - their sense of self-worth

and confidence is deeply connected to their ability to access good food, and their social and family lives are often closely tied to what they eat. Yet approaches that focus on direct food provision or raising income levels alone fail to recognise the complex needs that people who are food insecure face.

The organisations studied in this report - that provide access to good quality food first, before offering other additional support services - are able to tackle both food insecurity and some of the systemic issues that drive food insecurity at the same time. Dignified access to good, nutritious food has a strong and almost immediate impact on the way people feel about themselves. It can create the perfect foundations to build trust, social networks and support people to access other services necessary to tackle the root causes of food insecurity, such as low income or poor health. This has the potential to be transformational - a 'food first' but not 'food only' approach, that uses food as the gateway through which to build capacity and resilience.

To do this well, we need a holistic approach that goes beyond support service design by taking into account the role of the UK's food system in its entirety. The most vulnerable are on the frontline when shocks in the food sector happen. This is a fact that has become clearer during the pandemic: food insecurity quadrupled in the first month of lockdown, mostly for those on low incomes or living with long-term health conditions. As the UK creates new trade deals or makes changes to the food system, any reduction in quality or standards of food will inevitably hit the vulnerable consumers hardest, with serious consequences for their quality of life and their capacity to overcome food insecurity. For this reason, if we're serious about tackling food insecurity, it is essential that we support the food and farming sector to continue to deliver good quality food at low cost to the British public.

<sup>1</sup> The Food Foundation. Too Poor to Eat: 8.4 million struggling to afford to eat in the UK. 2016. Available at <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/too-poor-to-eat-8-4-million-struggling-to-afford-to-eat-in-the-uk> [accessed 10/02/2021]

This report draws on:

- An open access survey of 304 people using community groups who are on forms of income support (such as Universal Credit), disability benefits or financial support during the pandemic;<sup>2</sup>
- A series of six one-to-one online interviews with community group users;<sup>3</sup>
- An evidence review of grey and academic literature on the characteristics and nature of food insecurity;
- A series of expert interviews with people across academia and the food sector.

Chapter 1 explores the experience of people who are vulnerable to food insecurity, including their preferences regarding what they buy and the key compromises they make in practice as a result of physical and financial barriers. In addition we look at how food impacts this group and how the pandemic has affected what this group eats.

Chapter 2 reviews user experience of different types of government support when experiencing food insecurity. This includes support before and during the pandemic, such as free school meals, vouchers and Universal Credit. We explore the quality and sufficiency of the food provided, the impacts it has had on users and the policy implications.

Chapter 3 focuses on the work conducted by community groups to tackle food insecurity long-term. We look at the holistic impact community groups have on individuals, in addition to the impact on diets and access to food.

The final chapter puts forward a series of recommendations aimed at national and local policymakers to work with the food sector to deliver better support services to tackle food insecurity. These provide opportunities for the government to enable local governments and community organisations to provide support services that enable better access to food alongside pathways out of food insecurity altogether.

<sup>2</sup> Quotes from the open access survey have been used throughout the report. To protect the anonymity of our respondents, we have attributed these to their Gender, Age and Region as provided.

<sup>3</sup> These interviews have been used to form our case studies. To protect the anonymity of our interviewees we have given them aliases which we use to cite them throughout the report.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE VALUE OF FOOD

“[Good quality food] it’s everything, isn’t it?”

Male, 65+, Hartlepool

“... it is almost impossible for people on a very low income to eat healthy.[..] Food banks are an amazing help - but even the poor want to eat healthy.”

Female, 65+, North East England

Too often, the relationships people who are vulnerable to food insecurity have with food are overlooked by national policymakers as they focus on ‘calories in’. Yet despite the challenges those who are vulnerable to food insecurity face, food remains an important part of their lives, representing a lot more than simply fuel to keep going. This chapter explores the experiences of people who are vulnerable to food insecurity, highlighting the things they value in food, beyond calories. We also explore the key compromises they have to make when buying food as a result of their financial or physical circumstances.

Our open access survey indicated that respondents aspired to prioritise quality, healthiness and cost as their three most important factors when making decisions about the food they bought (as shown in Figure 1 below). However, in practice they often had to compromise on both quality and healthiness in order to buy or access food. In addition, at a national level, we found unsurprisingly that cost tends to be the priority for those who earn under £20,000 per year: four in ten (42%) said that cost is the most important factor in determining what they eat. This was a lot higher than the population average (26%) and those who earn over £40,000 (18%). In the same survey, we also found that 60% of those earning under £20,000 per year said that food was important to their family and social life, lower than the national average (71%).

**FIGURE 1: CONSUMER VALUES OF PEOPLE VULNERABLE TO FOOD INSECURITY**

ITEM	TOTAL SCORE*	OVERALL RANK
Quality	2243	1
Healthiness	2212	2
Cost (including special offers)	1857	3
Habit (including what you or your family are used to eating)	1480	4
Sustainability	1400	5
Animal welfare	1256	6
Convenience (e.g. how close the shop is or how long it takes to prepare)	1229	7
Brand	1159	8
Source (where the food is from e.g. the UK or France)	844	9

\* Score is a weighted calculation. Items ranked first are valued higher than the following ranks, the score is a sum of all weighted rank counts (See Appendix B).

For most of our survey respondents, good quality food is extremely important to their quality of life. Many define quality as 'fresh' and 'unprocessed' food, including whole grains, meat, fruit and vegetables - some mentioned a variety of colours was also an important part of eating good quality food. A smaller number wanted to prioritise where the food was sourced to be 'as local as possible'. Some respondents explained how they would ideally buy British as they could trust the farmers' standards and the freshness of local produce (Female, 45-54, North East England), and for some this was felt especially in the context of meat (Male, 65+, North East England). The experience of eating this kind of food for most of our survey respondents had a direct impact on the way they felt and their own assessment of their quality of life. This is not surprising given the important relationship between what you eat and your health and wellbeing.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the value of good food itself, respondents often explained how food was an important part of their family and social lives. Some described food as a "love language" (Female, 35-44, London) or a way to "bond and learn" with other members of their family about how to cook and new cultures (Female,

35-44, North East England). One respondent who is disabled explained eating a meal in a cafe was often the only time they were able to meet anyone, as otherwise they were "isolated" (Male, 55-64, London). As these survey respondents explain, preparing, cooking or eating food with others is one of the key ways of bonding and building important relationships with others.

Food insecurity, nonetheless, has an acute impact on what people eat and means that they are the most vulnerable to eating unhealthy or poor quality food. In the case of personal financial shocks or national shocks to the food market, they are likely to find themselves unable to follow through with the diets they described above.

A House of Lords report published in 2020 said that low-income families were left with "little or no choice" about diet, forced to eat unhealthy food or go without.<sup>5</sup> This conclusion is true for many of our respondents in our open access survey, who reported having to make difficult decisions about what they ate in order to make their budget stretch or access food with a disability or health condition. We found two key compromises that they tended to make were healthiness, and quality and standards.

## COMPROMISE 1: HEALTHINESS

A key compromise when buying food was nutritional content. Many people explained how they had to be "really careful" with what they spent on food, especially as over time the cost of food had gone up while their incomes had remained the same. Additionally, some reported that fluctuating prices and their fluctuating income meant that some weeks they couldn't afford fresh fruit and vegetables, while other weeks they could (Female, 55-64, North West England).

One respondent, who works part-time and receives a top-up from Universal Credit, explained that she likes buying fruit for her baby but often has to make the difficult decision of not buying it in order to pay for gas and electricity - having already cut her TV subscription and other things she refers to as "luxuries" (Female, 25-34, North East England). Others explained how being made redundant from their job immediately meant they had to go without meals and provide their children with tinned food as it was the cheapest and safest option - 'safest option' meaning that it wouldn't go off (Female, 25-34, North West England).

## COMPROMISE 2: QUALITY AND STANDARDS

In addition to compromising on nutritional content of food, many have to compromise on food standards. Indeed, many felt particularly frustrated by the standard of food they were able to afford in supermarkets and shops. One respondent explained that they were recently given two organic chicken breasts that tasted much better than the "cheap rubbish" that they buy, leaving them feeling angry. Others talked about the frustration of having to buy foods with yellow stickers that were always processed or ready meals (Female, 55-64, North West England), or white bread and Coca-Cola because they were the cheaper, filling options.

4 Yau, A., Adams, J. and White, M. Food insecurity in the UK – why we need a new normal. The Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 30 April 2020. Available at [www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/food-insecurity-uk-why-we-need-new-normal](http://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/food-insecurity-uk-why-we-need-new-normal) [accessed 10/08/2021]

5 Connors, C. and others. The lived experience of food insecurity under Covid-19. Food Standards Agency, July 2020. Available at [www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-food-insecurity-2020\\_-report-v5.pdf](http://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-food-insecurity-2020_-report-v5.pdf) [accessed 21/06/2021]

## FIGURE 2

### THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON PEOPLE WHO ARE VULNERABLE TO FOOD INSECURITY DIETS

DURING THE PANDEMIC, WOULD YOU SAY YOU HAVE DONE THE FOLLOWING MORE OR LESS THAN YOU DID BEFORE?



Some also explained how factors such as equipment and time were compounding factors. For example, those with long working hours were often left tired and “without the energy” to cook wholesome meals, but were also unable to afford an option that was both healthy and convenient (Female, 35-44, North West England). Others noted how difficult it was to buy healthy food on a budget and the need for better education on nutrition and budgeting (Female, 65+, London). In addition, respondents explained that they would not try new foods for fear that the food would be wasted as their family might reject the food.

A final key experience we heard was one of isolation and physical barriers that were often felt simultaneously. This was particularly felt by those with physical disabilities or high levels of anxiety, who found themselves unable to work or socialise. These people often struggled to physically access healthy food in the shops close to their home, which were either more expensive than big supermarkets or simply didn't stock the types of food they needed.

### THE IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON FOOD INSECURITY

We can see that the most recent shock to the food sector, the Covid-19 pandemic, hit those vulnerable to food insecurity hardest, that is low income groups and the physically vulnerable. This was picked up in the significant increase in the proportion of people needing emergency food aid. Leading food aid charities, including The Trussell Trust and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), reported a 177% increase in demand for emergency food assistance between March 2019 and March 2020.<sup>6</sup>

The challenges experienced by these groups came through in our data. Yet this was to some extent a mixed picture: there were positives for those who have had more time, cooked more and eaten with their family more. This is consistent with other research – such as that published by Institute of Grocery Distribution – which suggests the public consciously took opportunities to make their diets healthier during the first lockdown.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless too many struggled to access food (33% of people

<sup>6</sup> Independent Food Aid Network. IFAN data since the outbreak of Covid-19. 2020. Available at [www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/ifan-data-since-covid-19](http://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/ifan-data-since-covid-19) [accessed 10/08/2021]

<sup>7</sup> IGD. Appetite for change - how to shift consumers' mindsets around fruit and vegetables. 29 January 2021. Available at [www.igd.com/charitable-impact/healthy-eating/content-library/article/t/video-appetite-for-change---how-to-shift-consumers-mindsets-around-fruit-and-vegetables/i/27576](http://www.igd.com/charitable-impact/healthy-eating/content-library/article/t/video-appetite-for-change---how-to-shift-consumers-mindsets-around-fruit-and-vegetables/i/27576) [accessed 21/06/2021]

in the open access survey). For some respondents this was because they had lost their job (due to the pandemic or health issues) and for others - who were already struggling to access affordable food in their area - this was the result of their normal techniques, such as shopping at multiple places, no longer being possible under restrictions.

We also heard from many respondents who were shielding or disabled that they had a particularly difficult time, having to rely on government packages or local shops that failed to cater to their needs. Many, as a result, described how they simply had to eat unhealthy food that they didn't like. Inevitably these experiences had significant impacts on how respondents felt about themselves and their mental health. In addition to feeling isolated, many felt worthless because of the poor food they were eating. As we explore further in Chapters 2 and 3, food support during the pandemic had significant impacts on this group's sense of self-worth, confidence and health.

These findings reveal two important considerations for policymakers.

1. The quality of food people eat has a direct impact on their quality of life in a way that they are very much conscious of. People who have access to good quality, healthy and nutritious food aren't just physically healthier; they also feel better, about themselves and about their lives, putting them in a much better position to

engage with wider services to address the other challenges they face, including low incomes. It follows that 'food only' approaches to food insecurity, including direct food provision, that focus only on calories, fail to take advantage of this effect to achieve wider holistic benefits. Equally, if the food provided is unhealthy, for many there are adverse effects on their self-esteem and resilience, making it more difficult for them to address underlying issues.

2. The challenges of accessing healthy food on a budget are clear. We argue that this has an important implication beyond the basic observation that people experiencing food insecurity would be less likely to if they had more money in their pockets. While ultimately true, it is important to recognise that the cost and availability of good quality food is determined as much by the health of the UK's food system as a whole as by demand. Ensuring that our food system is able to provide good quality food at relatively low cost must therefore be central to any serious attempt to tackle food insecurity, or we risk any attempt being undermined by a market flooded with low quality and unhealthy food. As we build trade deals post-Brexit and respond to the National Food Strategy, it is vital to consider how changes to food standards in the UK will inevitably impact what this group eats and their quality of life.



# CHAPTER 2

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNMENT-LED FOOD SUPPORT TODAY

In 2020 and 2021 the types of support for people who are food insecure changed in response to the pandemic. Overnight the pandemic increased food insecurity because of three main factors: reduction or loss of income, requiring the clinically vulnerable to stay at home or shield and the shift in the availability of food in supermarkets across the UK. Combined, these factors precipitated the quadrupling of food insecurity in the first month of the lockdown (April 2020).<sup>8</sup> We have seen a variety of support mechanisms from government, industry and the third sector across the four nations of the UK in response.

This section reviews the evidence of the success of government schemes before and during the pandemic and retells some of the experiences we heard through our qualitative research. We found that these services have provided many with a lifeline, but have had varied success: at times schemes have delivered insufficient or poor quality services, while other people have been left without support from the government completely. Similar to our findings in Chapter One, we found that poor

experiences of government support had a negative impact on people's wellbeing and sense of self-worth.

The responses led by the government have generally fit into the following categories:<sup>9</sup>

- school food;
- emergency finance for local authorities and charities;
- emergency food; and
- grocery box schemes for those shielding.

On the ground services have been delivered at a local level by local government, charities and schools.<sup>10</sup> This has meant the roll out of policy has significantly differed by local authority. For example, emergency finance in England - called the Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies - was rolled out at the discretion of the local authority. Those with pre-existing infrastructure to deliver welfare support had more success.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the local-led approach has

8 Loopstra, R. Vulnerability to food insecurity since the Covid-19 lockdown. The Food Foundation, 14 April 2020. Available at <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/vulnerability-to-food-insecurity-since-the-covid-19-lockdown> [accessed 15/06/2021]

9 Loopstra. Vulnerability to food insecurity. 2020.

10 Loopstra. Vulnerability to food insecurity. 2020.

11 Lambie-Mumford, H., Gordon, K. and Loopstra, R. Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity during the Covid-19 crisis across the UK. Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute, December 2020. Available at <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/food-vulnerability-during-covid-19> [accessed 15/06/2021]



been praised by experts, and is considered the more effective approach to reducing food insecurity, given the significant differences in the nature of food insecurity across local areas.<sup>12</sup>

According to our survey respondents, government schemes (see Figure 3) - some of which existed pre-pandemic - have had mixed success in helping them access good quality food.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the majority didn't feel the government is doing very much to help (74%), indicating the degree to which this group feels excluded.

## FREE SCHOOL MEALS: VOUCHERS AND HOLIDAY BOXES

Many in our open access survey described the vouchers, cash transfers and food boxes provided as alternatives for free school meals as "a godsend" or a "life saver" without which they could not have coped. Some respondents explained that the free school meal vouchers or vegetable boxes had been particularly useful because they had enabled them to buy or access better quality food than they would normally have been able to. For example, one respondent (Female, 35-44, Yorkshire and the Humber) with children eligible for free school meals explained that the vouchers had enabled her to buy better food than usual, such as fresh vegetables that she had then been able to slow cook. Others praised the vouchers irrespective of the quality, because without them they simply would have gone hungry. For example, one young woman (25-34, North West England) explained she had lost her job as a dental trainee and initially didn't qualify for Universal Credit, so her primary need was to feed her family regardless of how healthy the food was.

These experiences, however, were not necessarily representative of the experiences of using alternatives to free school meals. Data collected during the pandemic suggests that the quality of food provided by free school meals dipped during the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> Some of our interviews highlighted a tension between government policy and delivery, where the government stipulates healthy food is important but then provides poor quality or unhealthy food to those who are food insecure:

*"...they say the kids need nutritious food, but it's more processed stuff that they give[...]they shouldn't just give fish fingers and waffles"*

Female, 35-44, London

The vouchers scheme, while experiencing administrative problems initially, has also been criticised for specifying shops that were too far away from where recipients live or could not be used online.<sup>15</sup> This is reflected in the responses from our survey too, as many respondents described having to spend a significant proportion of their vouchers on the delivery cost for online orders (Female, 25-34, North East England) or were not able to use them online at all.

The merits of vouchers versus direct cash transfers in replacement of free school meals have been extensively debated. The different approaches during the pandemic theoretically have provided a large-scale experiment to evaluate different approaches, although due to limited data collection and the differences in delivery it is difficult to make any strong conclusions. However, the benefits of direct transfers have been noted as giving families more choice and flexibility over where and how to spend the money - with some, for example, being able to use the money to cover the cost of cooking equipment.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, schemes that gave direct bank transfers excluded those without bank accounts.<sup>17</sup>

## FOOD BOXES FOR PEOPLE SHIELDING

We often heard complaints in our open access survey regarding the standard and quality of the food provided through government food box schemes for those shielding. For example, one respondent who has been shielding during the pandemic (Female, 55-64, North West England) explained that they received almost exactly the same food each week, with limited fruit and vegetables and almost no meat. In addition, one respondent said that the only meat they were given was a tin of meatballs, that felt "closer to dog food" than human food (Male, 55-64, North West England). Others described being sent tinned beans, white bread, margarine and a pint of milk that wouldn't cover the week, let alone provide a nutritious meal (Male, 55-64, London).

12 Expert interviews.

13 Survey respondents are not representative of people on benefits or those vulnerable to food insecurity (see Appendix for demographic makeup of survey respondents).

14 Lambie-Mumford, Gordon and Loopstra. Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity. 2020.

15 Lambie-Mumford, Gordon and Loopstra. Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity. 2020.

16 Lambie-Mumford, Gordon and Loopstra. Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity. 2020.

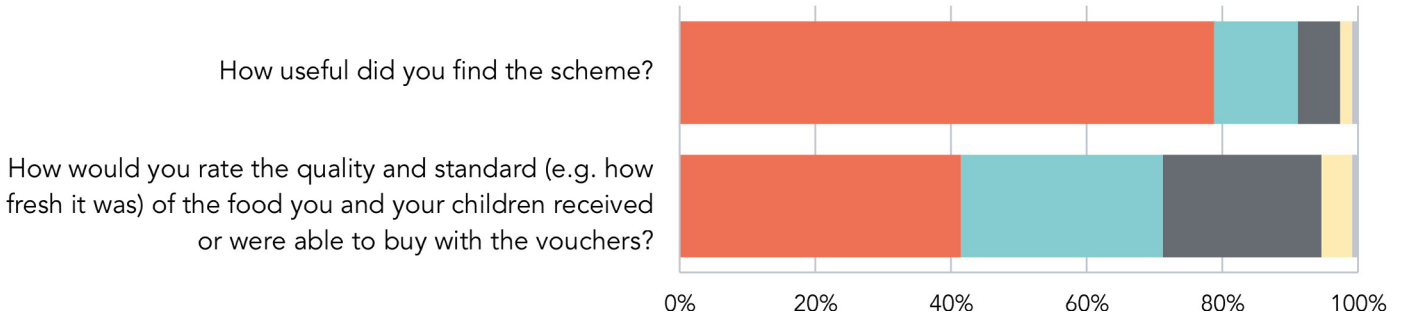
17 Lambie-Mumford, Gordon and Loopstra. Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity. 2020.

**FIGURE 3**

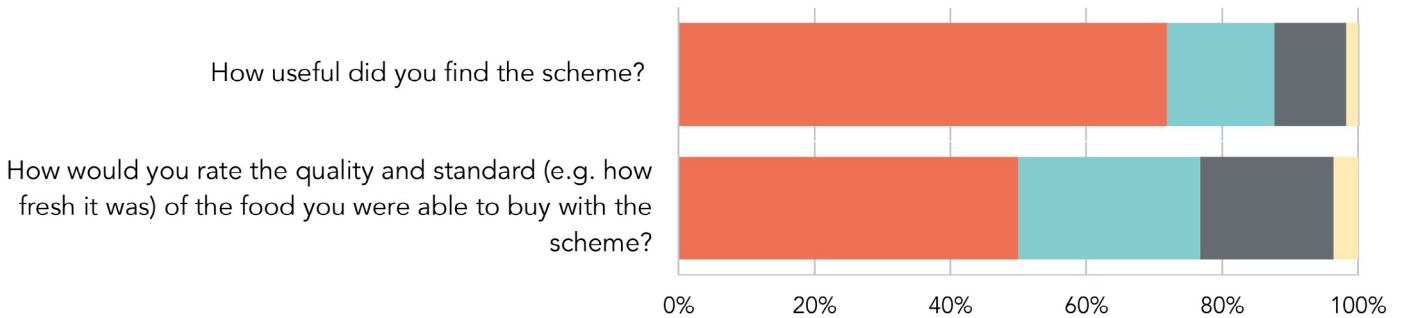
**EXPERIENCE OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS**

- Very useful/Very good
- Mostly useful/good quality
- Sometimes useful/Neither good or bad quality
- Rarely useful/Poor quality
- Never useful/very poor quality
- I have not used this scheme

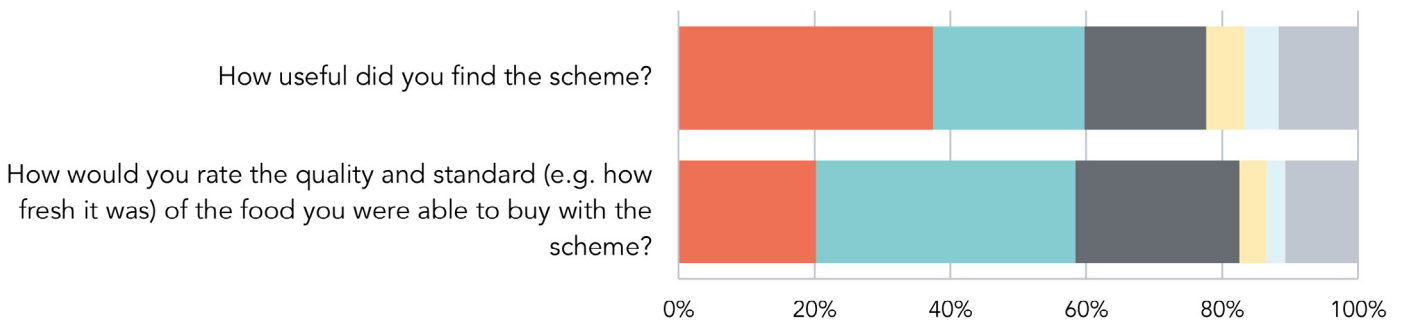
**FREE SCHOOL MEALS (TOTAL: 113)**



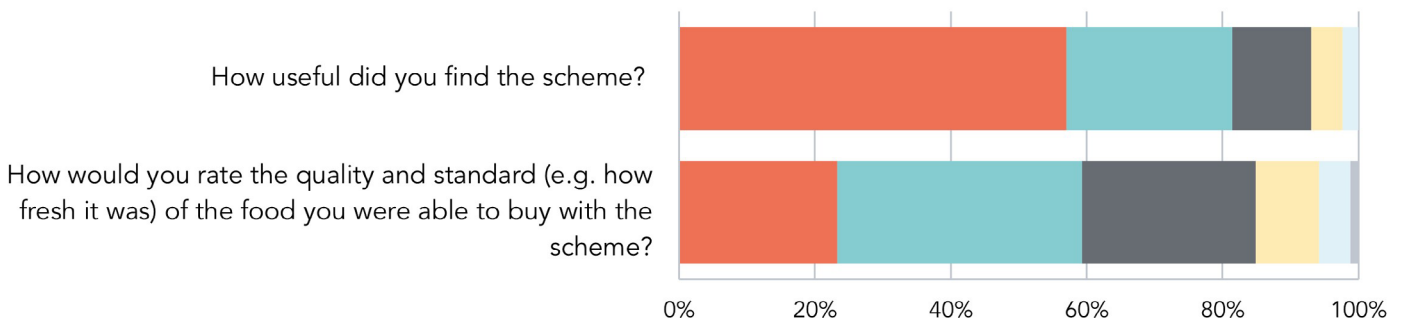
**VOUCHERS E.G. HEALTHY START (TOTAL: 57)**



**BENEFITS E.G. UNIVERSAL CREDIT (TOTAL: 179)**



**GROCERY BOX OR FOOD PARCELS (TOTAL: 86)**



These experiences, unfortunately, seem representative of the schemes, substantiating the stories heard via the media and conclusions made in various government reports.<sup>18</sup> An evidence review monitoring the success of the scheme summarises:

*“The contents of the grocery boxes delivered were generally not adequate. They did not provide sufficient fresh food of good quality, and the boxes were generally not appropriate for meeting the nutritional, cultural or dietary needs of their recipients.”<sup>19</sup>*

## UNIVERSAL CREDIT

A further source of support throughout the pandemic was an uplift to Universal Credit, increasing household budgets by £20 per week. Our data suggests that those who have received Universal Credit (UC) have found it relatively useful (see Figure 3), but those receiving UC were not always able to access good quality food - with or without the uplift. This is likely reflective of a more systemic problem, that many UC recipients generally are far more likely to be food insecure and unable to cover their housing costs, bills and food with their monthly payments. The Family Resources Survey 2019/2020 revealed that as many as four in ten (43%) of households on UC experience food insecurity.<sup>20</sup> Further, areas that move onto UC from the old benefits system are likely to see increases in food bank use.<sup>21</sup> This played out in our one-to-one interviews. Laura, who suffers from anxiety and poor mental health, explained that support from the government often didn't cover the cost of food in local supermarkets:

*“I get £350-odd a month. That [has to cover] all my bills, my rent, my water, Council Tax, TV licence. By the time all your bills have come out, you've got less than £100 for yourself for the month. With that, you have to buy food shopping. So, it is quite hard.”*

Laura

However, others fell through the net altogether. These respondents in our survey explained how they found themselves struggling to afford food for themselves or their family on their wages, but were ineligible for UC. For those unable to access support through the government, many rely on food banks and community groups.

Some respondents in our survey relied on their local networks during the pandemic: for example one respondent (Male, 55-64, London) explained that their neighbour, a paramedic, brought him hot meals from his canteen to supplement the food he was delivered through the food boxes, which alone would not have sustained him.

In addition, many of the respondents used the community groups in conjunction with UC or food banks. For example, some explained how the skills they learnt in Bags of Taste helped them cook more with less. Others used the Community Shop or TBTT to access better quality food at a lower price, in particular fresh meat and vegetables that meant their benefits could go further (see Chapter 3).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

There are four key learnings for policymakers from this chapter.

1. Government support in these case studies has been essential and should not end abruptly for recipients. As our research shows, the people receiving food parcels, vouchers and free school meals have relied on them to eat. As restrictions ease and the government considers how to peel back support it must do so cautiously and avoid additional hardship from a lack of provision or access to good food.
2. There is a need to 'level up' (that is, improve overall) the standard of food provided by the central government to people who are food insecure. Many respondents in our open access survey who received government assistance described eating poor quality food, unhealthy food or simply not receiving enough food and skipping meals as a result. This experience often made respondents in our survey feel worthless and disempowered, as well as meaning people went without basic necessities. This will likely require additional standards and better regulation of food services provided directly by, or on behalf of, the government.
3. Local governments and local institutions have played an important role in delivering food services during the pandemic. The need to mobilise support quickly, and the various levels

18 Rayner, J. Government attacked for ignoring expert advice on nutrition in food parcels. The Guardian, 21 June 2020. Available at [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/21/government-attacked-for-ignoring-expert-advice-on-nutrition-in-food-parcels](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/21/government-attacked-for-ignoring-expert-advice-on-nutrition-in-food-parcels) [accessed 10/08/2021]

19 Lambie-Mumford, Gordon and Loopstra. Monitoring responses to risk of rising household food insecurity. 2020. p. 59.

20 GOV.UK. Family Resources Survey: financial year 2019 to 2020. 25 March 2021. Available at [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2019-to-2020) [accessed 10/08/2021]

21 The Trussell Trust. Universal Credit and food banks. 2021. Available at [www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/universal-credit-and-foodbank-use](http://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/universal-credit-and-foodbank-use) [accessed 15/06/2021]

of infrastructure available to provide support across different local authorities led to patchy delivery overall. While the local approach should be commended - as the local organisations had the best local knowledge and were best able to deliver on the ground - there is a clear call to action to ensure that all local authorities are equally well resourced to ensure people in their local communities have access to good food in an emergency and beyond.

4. The benefits system needs to better respond to food insecurity. Often people find themselves unable to access good food because their benefits don't cover their bills. Most respondents who received Universal Credit often struggled to make their payments cover their rent, bills and food, finding themselves having to compromise on quality or health in order to make ends meet. They often rely on community groups to help make their money go further in their local area. The findings from our survey reinforce the need for policymakers to re-evaluate the benefits system and its capacity to deliver to people who are at risk of food insecurity.

# CHAPTER 3

## THE TRIPLE DIVIDEND OF COMMUNITY GROUPS

The community groups we partnered with - Bags of Taste, The Bread and Butter Thing and Community Shop - have been set up to improve people's access to good, nutritious meals. For most of these groups, their long-term aim is to no longer need to exist, and have eradicated food insecurity in the UK. In addition to providing food, community groups deliver - or link users up with - other support services (such as employment support or mental health training) that provide a pathway for users to become more food secure long-term. In that sense, food is sometimes the initial pull to get people interested in the community groups that can then encourage users to try other services - demonstrating one of the positives of a 'food first' approach to tackling food insecurity long-term.

In contrast to the government schemes discussed in the previous chapter, the community groups we worked with were often successful in supporting users to make longer-term changes because of the positive relationships they were able to build with their users. Overall, we find this 'food first' approach has three key 'dividends' for users and communities:

Improves diet and health. It helps users immediately access better quality and healthier food that would have been out of their budget or unavailable in their local area in a more dignified and empowering way. This can, overnight, enable users and their families to have a healthier and more nutritious diet.

Improves mental health and confidence. The atmosphere created by community groups, where the users are empowered and in better control of their diet, creates the perfect platform for people to build their confidence and improve their mental health - some groups also provide mental health or resilience training on site, which directly helps users build up their capacity.

Improves resilience and social infrastructure. These spaces can also provide people with a platform to meet and bond with others in their local community. This is vital for tackling food insecurity given the close correlation between food insecurity and isolation. In addition, the groups also either provide other services on site, or directly link people up with other services that they might have previously not known or heard about, helping them find a pathway out of food insecurity.

The longer-term aim is consistent with the Food Ladder approach: an evidence-based approach to tackling food insecurity that aims to develop positive engagements with food for those who are food insecure and help local communities build their areas into more resilient places where people want to live, raise their children and grow old.<sup>22</sup> Within this approach is the need for social services and emergency access to food, but as something that then directs people onto other services such as the community groups we discuss in this report that help tackle the root causes of food insecurity.

22 Blake, M. Food Ladders: A multi-scaled approach to everyday food security and community resilience. GeoFoodie, 19 June 2019. Available at <https://geofoodie.org/2019/06/19/food-ladders/#more-48713> [accessed 10/08/2021]

## FOOD LADDERS APPROACH

Food Ladders have three levels of intervention:

- **Rung 1: Catching.** This first rung provides a starting point for those who are in crisis. Such interventions might include emergency food aid, mental health support, access to social services, and so on. Catching enables the ability to cope with a shock, whether that be the loss of a job, an unexpected large payment, debt, longer-term illness or relationship breakdown.
- **Rung 2: Capacity building to enable social innovation.** This second level supports those not currently in crisis, but who may be struggling to afford and/or access good food. Activities include training programmes, shared cooking and eating activities, food pantries, children's holiday clubs, and voucher schemes. Done in a manner that celebrates difference and is not stigmatising, activities provide residents with accessible choices that relieve the stresses which co-exist with low incomes, expand skills and enable the recognition of personal and local assets. These interventions connect people together by creating networks of trust and reciprocity through shared activity around food. This sort of intervention enables people and communities to be more adaptable by expanding their pool of assets.
- **Rung 3: Self-organised community change.** This third rung supports communities to realise goals through self-organised projects that capitalise on local assets. Projects meet community needs as communities themselves identify them. Examples include developing a social enterprise based on community cooking knowledge that provides employment, cooperative food growing and food procurement that increases the local availability of good food, and regular social cooking and eating activities to overcome loneliness, cross social divides and create intergenerational knowledge transfer.

## DIVIDEND 1 - ACCESS TO GOOD QUALITY FOOD

*"[TBBT] helps a lot, because they do get some really good quality food, to be fair. And we pay £7.50, I think it is, a week. So, when it boils down to that, I'm able to get more, nicer, healthier food than what I was able to get before Bread and Butter. Because I know that prices have gone up as well, since the pandemic. So, it just makes it a bit easier for me to have that healthy balance, instead of just buying what I can afford."*

Laura

The most immediate aim of the community groups is to help people who are vulnerable to food insecurity access better quality food and as a result have a healthier and more diverse diet. As discussed in the previous chapters, those who are vulnerable to food insecurity often find it challenging to access good quality food. Many of those in receipt of government support find themselves in a dilemma where they would ideally buy better quality food, but go without enough or buy lower nutritional quality food in order to eat. A limited budget is often compounded by other factors, such as living in a location that lacks affordable supermarkets. These schemes, however, support those who are food insecure to immediately gain access to food that would have been outside of

their budget in their local area, and in turn help them maintain a healthier diet.

Community Shop (see Case Study 2) and The Bread and Butter Thing (see Case Study 3) fill in the gaps by providing better food at a discounted rate, compared to what people would normally buy in a supermarket or shop close to their home. These organisations work with the food sector to reuse surplus food and resell it at a discounted rate. Users who qualify for the service (because they are food insecure) are then able to buy grocery bags or use a shop that sells good quality food for a fraction of the price. For example, one survey respondent (Female, 45-64, Yorkshire and the Humber) explained how using Community Shop had enabled her to buy spinach and sourdough bread that normally would have been out of their price range; another respondent said she had been able to buy more than just a bag of carrots and onions, instead buying more diverse vegetables (Female, 45-54, North West).

Indeed, interviewees also explained that they were able to buy much better food than they would have if they shopped in supermarkets. For example, Debbie is on Universal Credit and before using the Community Shop had found it challenging to buy good food for her and her son on the budget. She explained the kinds of decisions she would have previously struggled to make:



## CASE STUDY 1: BAGS OF TASTE

Bags of Taste helps people in poverty achieve an improved and healthier diet on a low budget long-term. Their beneficiaries include, but are not limited to, vulnerable adults, or people suffering with mental health issues, physical or mental disability, unemployment, insecure housing, debt, addiction or other issues.

Through a structured cooking and behavioural change programme, Bags of Taste motivates participants to independently source and cook homemade meals at just £1 a head. Their programme delivers participants a bag of equipment and ingredients, and provides a personal mentor to lead them through the first stage of the training, helping them to address their individual barriers. Following on from that they are provided long term support through social media groups with significant video and specialist resources.

The organisation targets deprived areas with high concentrations of fast food outlets where poor diet and household food insecurity are highly prevalent. In turn, they minimise chronic disease and financial difficulty. Their hyper-local community-led approach allows people to overcome social and financial barriers.

*"Like we went to Farm Foods yesterday and there were two packets of biscuits for £1, and we went to Sainsbury's and there was a watermelon for £2.50. Now, if you've only got a couple of pounds, what are you doing? Because you're not going to buy watermelon – you know, it's a bit fun, it's nice, it's tasty, it's a bit fun – against the biscuits."*

Debbie

Now, though, through the Community Shop she is able to buy a wider range of foods - like a neck of lamb that she can cook into a stew - and open up a wider variety of foods for her son to try, including cuts of meat that would normally be too expensive. As she went on to explain:

*"It's the accessibility. It's not these grand gestures of things, it's being able to walk down the road and get some fruit and veg for a couple of pounds, that is good quality. [...] I mean, the fruit and vegetables and the bread, because of obviously being 20p, it's just amazing."*

Debbie

These findings are reinforced by the program's impact evaluations. For example, the members of TBBT report trying new foods (86% of members), cooking more healthily at home (77%) and eating more fruit and vegetables (77%).<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to the food surplus schemes described above, Bags of Taste (see Case Study 1) helps people access better quality food by teaching them

how to cook and make the most of more affordable food in their local area. This programme addresses barriers to healthy eating for people including physical access, transport, economic access, cultural access and knowledge and time through an intervention that builds confidence in cooking on a budget. Mitsy, who recently started using Bags of Taste, explained how it improved her ability to make the most of food:

*"I learned quickly, like the basic ingredients to nutritious and cheap chickpea curry with rice because I didn't really make lentil stuff. [...] I didn't really know how to cook. And I've actually started to learn to cook better."*

Mitsy

## DIVIDEND 2 - CONFIDENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH

*"For me, I get that sort of feel good feeling - ooh, we're having Daylesford lamb for tea – but it only cost me £2. So, it scratches both itches, if you like."*

Rachel

Many in our open access survey described that being the recipient of poor quality or unhealthy food from food banks and/or direct government schemes had negative effects on their confidence and self-worth. By contrast, many also described how having access to good quality food and being able to cook better food has had the opposite effect, helping to boost

23 The Bread and Butter Thing. Impact Report 2020. 2021. Available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f452e5078bf4f32c97a8045/t/606c504d21a1543550d3c9b2/1617711188561/The+Bread+and+Butter+Thing+Impact+Report.pdf> [accessed 10/08/2021]

their confidence and self-worth. As Debbie described in an interview, the quality and type of food would have a strong effect on how she felt about herself:

*"I don't know if you ever go on Mumsnet or any of those sorts of forums, but the stigma attached to frozen food or Farm Foods things or even Iceland, compared to people boasting about local butchers and locally-sourced fruit and veg. You do get judged. And even if you don't get judged, you judge yourself. You definitely judge yourself."*

Debbie

This experience speaks to a wider socio-economic challenge in our food system, where class and identity are reinforced by the type of food people eat. This phenomenon is a particular problem in the UK, where different types of food brands and styles of food can be plotted across the axis of cultural capital and wealth, and as a result low income consumers can often feel shame and stigma shopping at places with low social capital.<sup>24</sup> This stigma can reduce people's self-worth, which in turn reduces their capacity to eat well.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Debbie explained how her mental health and confidence were closely related to her diet:

*"...things like meal-planning, budgeting, time management, organisation, all those things. When you're depressed or you've got mental health issues[...] It's harder to look at the future, it's harder to say, 'I'm worth it, I'm worth getting this piece of meat and marinating it and slow-cooking it'."*

Debbie

She went on to explain how this could then reinforce one's negative mindset and depression, causing a negative feedback loop:

*"If you're a bit depressed, you're lacking motivation, you are not going to feel the ability to plan a meal, to go out and source products, plan it, follow a recipe, serve it up. It's far easier to throw in a pizza. And then, maybe on the back of that, if you lose a little bit of self-worth, you have a bit of mum guilt, that is a real thing."*

Debbie

This is where community-focused support comes in: primarily because these interventions prioritise dignity and respect for those who are food insecure. For example, Mahlia, who lost her job during the pandemic, explained how she had lost her

confidence at the same time, but joining Bags of Taste had helped her feel better about her difficult economic situation:

*"I was getting really a bit low about it[...] things are really bad, I don't afford stuff for my children, it's all not good. And I found this group and I'm really happy, because they have a WhatsApp group, so they upload a lot of easy and simple recipes, with less ingredients, cheap ingredients, that are easily available locally."*

Mahlia

The role of the workforce in these services are also important. Mitsy explained how a close relationship with the mentor at Bags of Taste helped her learn new skills and become more confident:

*"...with the Bags of Taste. It was like I said, they would give us the recipe. They gave us the ingredients. And then we'd cook it and then we'd send the picture on the WhatsApp group. [...] It was supportive because she was like my mentor."*

Mitsy

In addition to directly supporting consumers to feel more confident, the groups also provide wrap-around support services for their users. The Community Shop and TBBT (see Case Studies 2 and 3) aim to offer support services that help people with their anxiety, improve their mental health and strengthen other key skills.

### **DIVIDEND 3 - RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

*"I met Jack, through the Community Hub, and they were advertising for a Sales Assistant. So, I applied for it and they went through an agency, for some reason they bounced my CV back, and said that I hadn't been successful. So, I just went straight to the shop and said, 'Look, I applied for this position, and I, like everybody else, want a fair interview, and I'm not leaving until you give me one.' So, they set up a date for the interview, they interviewed me the same as they did everybody else, but I was the successful candidate. So, yes, I started a twenty hour post, which has turned into something a little bit more than that, and I'm now on the ladder to retraining, I'm retraining for supervisory, possibly management roles."*

Rachel

<sup>24</sup> Bags of Taste Limited. Written evidence (FPO0029). UK Parliament, 11 September 2019. Available at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/175/pdf/> [accessed 10/08/2021]

<sup>25</sup> Bags of Taste Limited. Written evidence. 2019.



## CASE STUDY 2: COMMUNITY SHOP

Community Shop does more than just put food on people's plates today, it builds stronger individuals and more confident communities by not only providing access to deeply discounted food but also delivering life-changing personal development programmes.

Community Shop is open to people who live locally, receive welfare support and are motivated to make a positive change to their lives. In-store, members have access to deeply discounted food and products which have predominantly been donated by major retailers and manufacturers and may otherwise have gone to waste. Shoppers can access items up to 70% off the normal retail price, helping to stretch family budgets further.

The revenue raised in-store is invested in Community Hub, where members can access personal development support, with sessions including cook clubs, home budgeting, interview skills and business courses. The store also houses Community Kitchen, offering hot meals to members and their families, with kids eating for free!

Our impact:

- 94% of members said their quality of life has improved since joining Community Shop
- Members save on average £212 per month on food
- 1,603 members supported back into employment or higher education

Beyond direct benefits to the individuals' health and wellbeing, we heard from users how these spaces - once their confidence had been boosted - provided the perfect place for them to build up their capacity to deal with future challenges and raise their income. As Joseph Chow, Social Impact Manager at Community Shop, explained, the role of his organisation is to help people move out of poverty and food insecurity and so, ultimately, not to exist. It does this by supporting people to build back resilience through boosting their mental health and raising their income. Similarly, Mark Game, CEO of TBBT, explained that the footfall from people buying the food boxes in their community spaces often provides an informal opportunity for them to engage with other support services that they wouldn't necessarily have done before, in turn supporting them to rebuild their resilience.

Rachel's journey above is an example: she was eventually able to get back into work after the support she'd received through the Community Shop. Part of this, she explained, was because of the relationships she'd built with the mentors who she felt able to trust. This story demonstrates the value in having support from people outside of the state or lines of authority, where the power imbalance can leave people unable to trust or build meaningful relationships with officials that work there. Rachel's story is not unique: in 2019, Community Shop won a

Queen's Award for, among other things, supporting 642 members back into work and 809 into further education.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to providing life skills, the community-focused groups offer members a place to build important social networks and feel less isolated - a factor that often compounds food insecurity (see Chapter One). The Bread and Butter Thing, for example, reported last year that 97% of their members say TBBT is good for the community and a further 69% said they are less lonely and 76% feel more engaged with their community.<sup>27</sup>

We heard from our interviews and survey respondents that these groups can provide a safe space for people to meet others in similar situations and build social networks. These social networks help people to feel less isolated and improve their mental health. Laura, who has anxiety and struggles to make the income from Universal Credit stretch to cover food, for example, explained how using TBBT helps her with her anxiety and to meet other people in her situation:

*"It is just nice to interact with other people, and it's nice to know that - because at first, I thought it was a bit daunting, having to use a charity like that [to access food]. But then seeing how many people actually do go, it does make you feel a lot better, that it's not*

26 Company Shop Group. Hat-trick for Company Shop Group, as Community Shop wins Queen's Award. 29 April 2021. Available at [www.companysshopgroup.co.uk/news/community-shop-wins-queens-award](http://www.companysshopgroup.co.uk/news/community-shop-wins-queens-award) [accessed 10/08/2021]

27 The Bread and Butter Thing. Impact Report 2020. 2021. Available at <http://tbbt-impact4.surge.sh/>

*just you in that situation, and you shouldn't have to feel any way about it, you should feel proud. So, yes, it is a really good help. It's really good."*

Laura

Similarly, Debbie had felt less isolated because of the Community Shop, its restaurant (outside of lockdown restrictions) and the Facebook group helped her make friends with other mothers:

*"It's a lot more than just the food, isn't it? I mean, you can go into Jack's down the road, Tesco down the road, and you wouldn't see the same person twice. It's very impersonal. [...] But Community Shop makes you feel like you're not on your own, everyone is struggling, we're all in the queue for the cheap bread. And there is no judgment and let's just bustle on with it."*

Debbie

Debbie has also used a parenting course with Community Shop that helped her feel more confident in her parenting. Again these stories are not unique. Charities that receive surplus food from FareShare report that their main impact, beyond food, is reducing social isolation and loneliness.<sup>28</sup> This is further substantiated by research that suggests that food in particular is a uniquely helpful mechanism through which people can establish social bonds, as well as strengthening a sense of belonging and community.<sup>29</sup> The success of this third and final dividend - creating social infrastructure - is perhaps just as reliant on the food element as it is the community atmosphere and wrap-around services offered.

The savings to the state from redistributing surplus food has been estimated at £50.9 million (this includes savings from the NHS, criminal justice sector and social care).<sup>30</sup> As part of improving local social infrastructure, community groups can also help reduce waste and the food sector's environmental impact.

### **CASE STUDY 3: THE BREAD AND BUTTER THING**

The Bread and Butter Thing aims to make life more affordable to people. It works closely with suppliers to encourage and help them to donate their surplus food safely and effectively, which they then redistribute to their network of members, via their food hubs and partners.

45% of members are on low incomes and 43% are worse off due to Covid-19. Over half of their members say they are living with some sort of physical or mental health condition.

TBBT provides pre-packed shopping - the contents vary week to week depending on what food is available and to ensure variety. Through Xcess, the independent food redistribution network, TBBT works to unlock untapped surplus and utilise it by making it accessible to communities.

They work in collaboration with local partners and national networks to create bespoke packages of support for local communities - offering advice and practical solutions for dealing with debt, managing utilities and accessing mental health support and available grants and funding.

According to TBBT's end of year impact report:

- 83% say using TBBT enables them to feed their families.
- On average, a TBBT member will save £26.50 each week on their food budget. 91% say TBBT is really good value for money.
- 83% have more money left over to buy more than basics.
- As a result of TBBT efforts, 86% of members have tried new foods, 77% have cooked more healthily at home, and 77% have eaten more fruit and vegetables.
- 97% of members say that TBBT is good for the community.

28 Blake, M. Releasing social value from surplus food: Impact of British Red Cross funding on FareShare to tackle Loneliness and Isolation. Evaluation Final Report. University of Sheffield, May 2020. Available at <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.30789.27361> [accessed 10/08/2021]

29 Blake, M. Releasing social value from surplus food. 2020.

30 FareShare. Redistributing surplus food to charities saves the UK economy £51 million every year. 22 October 2018. Available at <https://fareshare.org.uk/news-media/press-releases/redistributing-surplus-food-to-charities-saves-the-uk-economy-51-million-every-year> [accessed 10/08/2021]

# RECOMMENDATIONS: EXPANDING THE FOOD FIRST APPROACH TO TACKLING FOOD INSECURITY

The real-life experiences in this paper are proof of what is possible when organisations take a ‘food first’, relational approach to tackling food insecurity. Starting with good quality food and then providing a pathway to build up confidence and access additional services can help them to tackle the root problems - this can be anything from advice on how to access the benefits system, to childcare, to mental health services. Additionally, we’ve seen that organisations without hierarchical relationships are more able to create safe and trusting environments for users to build networks and skills at their own pace.

Given the scale and characteristics of food insecurity, there is no doubt that the government’s overall objective must be to raise people’s income, as part of the recovery from the pandemic more broadly. But if it is to tackle food insecurity for those who currently experience it, it must also in the short term enable people to secure better access to good, nutritious food directly. Our recommendations thus aim to do three things:

1. Improve the infrastructure to enable community food groups to expand.
2. Work with the food sector and community groups to ensure all food services are ‘food first’ rather than ‘food only’.
3. Improve the benefits system for recipients.

## IMPROVING INFRASTRUCTURE TO ENABLE COMMUNITY GROUPS TO THRIVE

We have heard many stories of how people interacting with community food groups benefited members beyond improved access to food. As highlighted in Chapter 3, members of the groups could receive a triple dividend including access to better, healthier food; improved confidence and mental health; and access to spaces and services for them to build social networks, boost resilience and raise their income. Crucially, these places provide a safe space where people feel empowered, build trusting relationships and are able to draw on other services that help tackle the root causes of food insecurity. These programmes move away from the current model of service delivery, which is based on transactions and inputs towards relationships and building capacity.<sup>31</sup>

Extending the relational and person-first approaches demonstrated by the case studies in this report should be a priority for national policymakers aiming to reduce food insecurity. To achieve this, we recommend that policymakers identify and utilise the role of local authorities, who have the local know-how, in convening a longer-term strategy to build food security in local areas. This should take a two pronged approach that is rooted in establishing thriving local food sectors through supporting producers (from farmers to manufacturers

31 Mackenzie, P. The Social State: From Transactional to Relational Public Services. Demos, July 2021. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/project/the-social-state-from-transactional-to-relational-public-services> [accessed 10/08/2021]

to independent retailers), in addition to creating communal spaces for food programmes, where people can meet others in their local area and access other services including mental health and employment support services. This can be done in a way to encourage local foodscapes to offer a more diverse range of food supply for local residents.<sup>32</sup>

This is in line with a Food Ladders approach, where local authorities work strategically with local communities (for example, local charities, food banks, social enterprises, community groups, businesses and volunteers) to develop local food resilience (see Chapter 3). This approach goes beyond ensuring emergency food aid is available, which we know alone will not solve food insecurity, to ensure that local areas have the capacity to avoid food insecurity altogether.

Emulating some of the case studies in this report, this Food Ladders Strategy should be aimed at building community resilience and capacity - rather than simply about providing food aid. Local authorities should use food to mobilise the development of the social networks and services that provide people who currently experience food insecurity a pathway out of it. Thus, strategies should prioritise creating safe and inclusive places for people with complex needs - such as poor mental health, long-term illness, physical disabilities, financial insecurity, or caring responsibilities. These spaces should provide an opportunity for people to meet other users and build relationships and social capital. In addition to the spaces themselves, local authorities should work with local food producers to improve the local food sector too, for example providing people who are food insecure with the opportunity to get involved and build experience in the food sector. As demonstrated by Preston Council, ensuring services are procured from local organisations that hire or provide jobs to their members who otherwise would be at risk of food insecurity is a key way of maximising public sector spend.<sup>33</sup>

Given it is a relatively new and untested approach at government level, we recommend that the government begin with a pilot programme with a view to eventually scale the approach. We therefore recommend:

### **Recommendation 1: The government should pilot a local Food Ladder Strategy.**

To ensure all local governments have the resources to develop these inclusive spaces, and pioneer different models of service delivery akin to that of the three dividends of the community group model highlighted in this paper, the government should build on the funding it has already made available through the Community Ownership Fund.<sup>34</sup> We recommend making further funding available to develop new or build on existing types of social infrastructure (i.e. places such as community kitchens or community allotments that enable people to make connections and develop skills). This will enable the establishment of community food groups which can support local communities.

### **Recommendation 2: The government should set up a Community Infrastructure Grant for developing social infrastructure, such as community hubs and spaces for food groups to use.**

The government should fund local authorities to administer community-led local services that deal with the multitude of complex needs of people who experience food insecurity long-term. In addition to direct grant funding from the central government to ensure the infrastructure exists, the government should also ensure there is funding for direct services. To do this the government should consider allocating public health funding to support community groups that improve people's access to healthy food.

### **Recommendation 3: The next Spending Review should assess the capacity to ring-fence public health spending for community groups that safeguard access to healthy food for local communities.**

A big difference highlighted between the community groups and some of the government-led food support was a difference in quality. Many of our respondents remarked that the quality of food from community groups was much higher than that which they would get in normal supermarkets or from government schemes during the pandemic. Indeed, the testimonies of recipients of direct government support in this research often included receiving food that lacked quality, was unhealthy, or was simply

32 Lever, J. and others. A "Safe" and "Just" Regional Food System. University of Huddersfield, 18 July 2021. Available at <https://pure.hud.ac.uk/en/publications/a-safe-and-just-regional-food-system> [accessed 10/08/2021]

33 Lockey, A. and Glover, B. The Wealth Within: The 'Preston Model' and the new municipalism. Demos, June 2019. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/project/the-wealth-within-the-preston-model-and-the-new-municipalism> [accessed 10/08/2021]

34 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Community Ownership Fund. GOV.UK, 3 March 2021. Available at [www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-ownership-fund/community-ownership-fund](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-ownership-fund/community-ownership-fund) [accessed 10/08/2021]

not enough. This meant insufficient food was provided to some of the most vulnerable members of society during the pandemic without adequate oversight.<sup>35</sup>

It is therefore important that community groups continue to be able to access and provide good quality food, particularly from local farmers and food producers. The National Food Strategy put forward a series of recommendations to protect food standards: we endorse these recommendations and welcome any steps to make them a reality.<sup>36</sup> As we build new trading relationships with other countries, we must prioritise protecting and promoting the standards that currently underpin our food sector. This is not just because it is important to the British public, but because as this research finds it risks further inequalities in our food sector.<sup>37</sup> Any changes or shocks in the food market, including a reduction in the standard of food sold in the UK, will disproportionately impact the quality of food vulnerable consumers eat.<sup>38</sup> We therefore support the National Food Strategy's recommendations to protect food standards.

Evidently, more needs to be done to make sure food provided by government suppliers or even community groups themselves is of good quality. The National Food Strategy has recommended that the government strengthen procurement standards and the regulation of said standards across the board.<sup>39, 40</sup> In previous Demos research we recommended that contracts regarding the procurement of food include minimum standards relating to nutrition.<sup>41</sup> We therefore recommend that the government follow through on the National Food Strategy's proposals to improve the nutritional standards in procurement.

## SHIFTING FROM A FOOD ONLY TO A FOOD FIRST APPROACH

One of the key draws of community groups for users is the food itself. We know food can bring people together. Food has been an essential conduit through which communities have come together in the pandemic: Demos polling found four in ten

Britons (40%) have shopped for someone else during the pandemic and a quarter (23%) have received this kind of support themselves.<sup>42</sup> As we heard from community group users in Chapter 3, meeting other people through community groups can be a key way to enable people to build social connections and networks - which we know have also been put at risk by the pandemic. We therefore recommend that policy makers as a key learning take on the following principle:

**Recommendation 4: National and local policymakers should take a 'Food First' approach to tackling food insecurity.**

It should be noted that this is not a 'food only' approach. It is an approach that begins with providing good food alongside other opportunities to users that can help make them more food secure, for example by raising their income. Crucially, this takes a more holistic approach to tackling food insecurity, helping people build important networks or raise their income, rather than just providing food or additional vouchers.

For this to work, we need a thriving food sector. The role of the food sector itself in reducing food inequality is often overlooked. Today, the UK food sector currently delivers higher animal welfare and sustainability standards for relatively cheap costs compared with the rest of the world.<sup>43</sup> This is something that the British public want, irrespective of income.<sup>44</sup> In addition to protecting standards, the government, when commissioning local organisations to take a 'food first' approach, can better support local economies and the food sector through improving public procurement.

It is estimated that over £2 billion per year is spent on the procurement of catering services.<sup>45</sup> If the government was to expand this spend on other food first support services through public health spending, for example, this would increase and provide additional levers for local authorities to improve local foodscapes. Drawing on community wealth building (CWB) principles put forward by Greater Manchester and Preston Council offers an opportunity to be more strategic in the way this

35 Rayner. Government attacked for ignoring expert advice. 2020.

36 The National Food Strategy. The National Food Strategy: Part One - Recommendations in Full. Available at [www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/8\\_NFS\\_Report\\_RecommendationsInFull.pdf](http://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/8_NFS_Report_RecommendationsInFull.pdf) [accessed 10/08/2021]

37 Lasko-Skinner, R. and Sweetland, J. Food in a Pandemic. Demos, March 2021. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Food-in-a-Pandemic.pdf> [accessed 10/08/2021]

38 Lasko-Skinner, R. and Sweetland, J. Food in a Pandemic 2021.

39 The National Food Strategy. The National Food Strategy: The Plan. July 2021. Available at [www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/1669\\_NFS\\_The\\_Plan\\_July21\\_S11.pdf](http://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/1669_NFS_The_Plan_July21_S11.pdf) [accessed 10/08/2021]

40 Lasko-Skinner, R. Turning the Tables: Making healthy choices easier for consumers. Demos, August 2020. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Turning-The-Tables-FINAL.pdf> [accessed 10/08/2021]

41 Lasko-Skinner. Turning the Tables. 2020.

42 Lasko-Skinner and Sweetland. Food in a Pandemic. 2021.

43 Defra Press Office. Maintaining our high food and environmental standards. GOV.UK, 28 October 2020. Available at <https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/10/28/maintaining-our-high-food-and-environmental-standards> [accessed 10/08/2021]

44 Lasko-Skinner and Sweetland. Food in a Pandemic. 2021.

45 Lasko-Skinner. Turning the Tables. 2020.



money is spent.<sup>46</sup> Ensuring services are procured from local organisations that hire or provide jobs to their members who otherwise would be at risk of food insecurity is a key way of maximising public sector spend. Case studies in this report show how members often want to and do get involved with the group they are part of and get part-time work too.

Similarly, leveraging public procurement can help support local food producers and stimulate the development of healthier local food markets. This can be done in a way to encourage local foodscapes to offer a more diverse range of food supply for local residents.<sup>47</sup> A local approach is particularly important given the geographical nature of food insecurity.<sup>48</sup>

The government procurement green paper has already indicated that procurement legislation will change in order to make it part of standard practice that the public sector procures services on the basis of their social value. Similarly, we also recommended that local authorities with high deprivation be able to innovate and experiment with CWB principles and alternative ways of purchasing services.<sup>49</sup> We recommend that local governments do this in relation to the local food sector:

**Recommendation 5: Local governments and public sector organisations should pilot alternative ways of procuring food services and community food programmes that follow a Community Wealth Building approach (CWB). Part of this should include creating jobs for people at risk of food insecurity who are looking for work.**

## **ENSURING THE BENEFITS SYSTEM RESPONDS TO FOOD INSECURITY**

We also heard from multiple respondents in our open access survey that the money they received via Universal Credit or the benefits system did not cover their bills and the food they need.

This is likely because their benefits are too low; more than four in ten people who are food insecure are also on Universal Credit.<sup>50</sup> It is therefore essential - as Demos has previously recommended - that a £20 per week increase in benefit payments during the pandemic be maintained long-term, which many other organisations have also recommended for similar reasons (e.g. the Joseph Rowntree Foundation).

**Recommendation 6: HM Treasury should make the £20-a-week increase in Universal Credit permanent.**

There are other challenges people face to accessing enough money through the benefits system to cover food. The benefits system continues today to be too complex to navigate and many lack awareness of what they are entitled to.<sup>51</sup> According to Turn2Us, at least £15 billion worth of benefits went unclaimed last year.<sup>52</sup> Further, the benefit cap is likely to be having an impact on people's overall monthly incomes, particularly single parent households and those with health conditions who are deemed able to work but in practice face significant barriers to work, including childcare and their health - both groups are more likely to be food insecure as a result.<sup>53</sup> However, many may be unaware that working part-time could raise their earnings. This plays out in the data, which suggests the cap has had limited impact on incentivising people into work: only 16% of people moved into work after being capped suggesting the impact on employment has been limited.<sup>54</sup>

Dealing with a lack of uptake and awareness of the benefits system and other support services could go a long way to prevent people facing food insecurity. This could be achieved through providing additional resources to organisations such as community groups with a track record of supporting people who interact with the benefits system to provide users with advice - as a trustworthy and impartial third party. In

46 Lockett, A. and Glover, B. The Wealth Within: The 'Preston Model' and the new municipalism. Demos, June 2019. Available at <https://demos.co.uk/project/the-wealth-within-the-preston-model-and-the-new-municipalism> [accessed 10/08/2021]

47 Lever, J. and others. A "Safe" and "Just" Regional Food System. University of Huddersfield, 18 July 2021. Available at <https://pure.hud.ac.uk/en/publications/a-safe-and-just-regional-food-system> [accessed 10/08/2021]

48 Moretti, A., Whitworth, A. and Blake, M. Adult Food insecurity at Local Authority Scale. University of Sheffield, 2021. Available at <https://shefuni.maps.arcgis.com/apps/interactive/index.html?appid=8be0cd9e18904c258afd3c959d6fc4d7&center=-3.3044,55.7862&level=6> [accessed 10/08/2021]

49 Pritchard, J. and Lasko-Skinner, R. Please Procure Responsibly: The state of public service commissioning. Reform, March 2019. Available at [https://reform.uk/sites/default/files/2019-03/Public%20Service%20Procurement\\_AW\\_WEB.pdf](https://reform.uk/sites/default/files/2019-03/Public%20Service%20Procurement_AW_WEB.pdf) [accessed 10/08/2021]

50 Spoor, E. Millions of people turn to food banks in latest evidence of food insecurity. The Trussell Trust, 29 July 2021. Available at [www.trusselltrust.org/2021/07/29/millions-of-people-turn-to-food-banks-in-latest-evidence-of-food-insecurity](http://www.trusselltrust.org/2021/07/29/millions-of-people-turn-to-food-banks-in-latest-evidence-of-food-insecurity) [accessed 10/08/2021]

51 Martin, G. Benefits adviser: I see people missing out on what they are entitled to every day. The i, 12 April 2019. Available at <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/benefits-adviser-dwp-universal-credit-people-missing-out-entitlement-278611> [accessed 10/08/2021]

52 Turn2Us. At least £15bn of benefits unclaimed last year. 24 May 2021. Available at [www.turn2us.org.uk/About-Us/Media-Centre/Press-releases-and-comments/At-least-15bn-of-benefits-unclaimed-last-year](http://www.turn2us.org.uk/About-Us/Media-Centre/Press-releases-and-comments/At-least-15bn-of-benefits-unclaimed-last-year) [accessed 10/08/2021]

53 Work and Pensions Select Committee. The benefit cap: Twenty-Fourth Report of Session 2017-19. UK Parliament, 12 March 2019. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmworpen/1477/full-report.html> [accessed 10/08/2021]

54 Child Poverty Action Group. Work and Pensions Committee Inquiry into the Benefit Cap: Updated written evidence from CPAG. September 2018. Available at <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/CPAG%20Updated%20Response%20-%20Work%20and%20Pensions%20Committee%20Inquiry%20into%20the%20Benefit%20Cap.pdf> [accessed 10/08/2021]

addition, the benefits system and the Department for Work and Pensions could take more advantage of its relationship with those who are food insecure, by ensuring they are directed to other non-work related schemes such as community food groups. We therefore recommend:

**Recommendation 7: The Department for Work and Pensions should review the potential to make more third-party support and guidance available to people accessing the benefits system to prevent hardship as a result of benefits going unclaimed.**

This could be supported by peer-to-peer networks, where recipients who help others navigate the benefits system are rewarded financially for their help. This support could include helping other recipients with their application or supporting them find part-time work.

**Recommendation 8: The Department for Work and Pensions should pilot a peer-to-peer support incentive scheme in conjunction with Universal Credit.**

# APPENDIX A

## METHODOLOGY

This report methodologically draws on an open access survey with members of the following community groups: Bags of Taste, The Bread and Butter Thing and Community Shop. The survey was open to members between 08/04/2021 - 20/04/2021, with 304 respondents. The survey asked respondents about:

- Their preferences regarding the types of food they eat and how those preferences play out in practice.
- How they felt about the quality of food they were able to access.
- How Covid-19 had impacted their diets.
- Their experiences of different government support schemes and how they rated their quality and utility.

We have 304 respondents in total, we include the demographic breakdown of people who responded to the survey below.

### GENDER

GENDER	RESPONSES	PERCENT
Male	55	18.15%
Female	245	80.86%
Other/prefer not to say	3	0.99%

### AGE

AGE	RESPONSES	PERCENT
18-24	3	1.00%
25-34	52	17.28%
35-44	82	27.24%
45-54	73	24.25%
55-64	64	21.26%
65+	27	8.97%

### REGION

REGION	RESPONSES	PERCENT
East Midlands	1	0.33%
East of England	3	0.99%
London	13	4.30%
North East England	79	26.16%
North West England	139	46.03%
Northern Ireland	0	0.00%
Scotland	0	0.00%
South East England	2	0.66%
South West England	1	0.33%
Wales	0	0.00%
West Midlands	2	0.66%
Yorkshire and the Humber	62	20.53%



## ETHNIC GROUP

ETHNICITY	RESPONSES	PERCENT
White British	265	87.46%
White other	11	3.63%
Mixed ethnic group	5	1.65%
Asian/Asian British	3	0.99%
Black/Black British	10	3.30%
Prefer not to say	4	1.32%
Other	5	1.65%

## CHILDREN

DO YOU HAVE ANY KIDS IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD UNDER 18?	RESPONSES	PERCENT
I've not got any under 18	140	46.82%
1	62	20.74%
2	51	17.06%
3	27	9.03%
4+	19	6.35%

## BENEFITS

HAVE YOU RECEIVED ANY OF THE FOLLOWING IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS? PLEASE SELECT ALL THAT APPLY TO YOU.	RESPONSES	PERCENT
Unemployment or income support benefits, such as Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support or Universal Credit in the past five years?	196	64.47%
Carers or disability benefits, such as Employment and Support Allowance or Personal Independence Payment in the past five years?	129	42.43%
Financial support from the government specifically relating to the pandemic, such as by being put on furlough or through the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme?	17	5.59%
I've not received any of the above.	48	15.79%

# APPENDIX B

## CALCULATIONS

### FOR FIGURE 1

Figure 1 demonstrates how the various consumer values are ranked among those who are vulnerable and/or facing food insecurity. This has been calculated by providing a value of "9" for when a respondent ranks a consumer value, such as Quality, first, then a value of "8" for the consumer value ranked second and so forth until the bottom ranked consumer value is given a value of "1". The summation of the respondents' ranked values are then used to provide the overall score, which is then weighted based on how many respondents used up all 9 options to rank. Based on this, we provide an overall view of how these consumer values rank among this sample group.

ITEM	TOTAL SCORE*	OVERALL RANK
Quality	2243	1
Healthiness	2212	2
Cost (including special offers)	1857	3
Habit (including what you or your family are used to eating)	1480	4
Sustainability	1400	5
Animal welfare	1256	6
Convenience (e.g. how close the shop is or how long it takes to prepare)	1229	7
Brand	1159	8
Source (where the food is from e.g. the UK or France)	844	9

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# DEMOS

**Demos** is a champion of people, ideas and democracy. We bring people together. We bridge divides. We listen and we understand. We are practical about the problems we face, but endlessly optimistic and ambitious about our capacity, together, to overcome them.

At a crossroads in Britain's history, we need ideas for renewal, reconnection and the restoration of hope. Challenges from populism to climate change remain unsolved, and a technological revolution dawns, but the centre of politics has been intellectually paralysed. Demos will change that. We can counter the impossible promises of the political extremes, and challenge despair – by bringing to life an aspirational narrative about the future of Britain that is rooted in the hopes and ambitions of people from across our country.

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