



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



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

Final Report – March 2026

THE
TAVISTOCK
INSTITUTE
OF HUMAN
RELATIONS



Sainsbury's

Executive summary

Introduction

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

£7.7 M

Investment

598

Food clubs

296,317

People reached

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

Key findings



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

Members' experience

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

Layer 1

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

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

Layer 2

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

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

Layer 3

Wraparound prevention support ('the goal'):

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

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

Outcomes for members and others

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

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



Food for thought

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

For delivery partners:

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

For funders:

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

For future evaluations:

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

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