

# **Exploring the Contribution of Community Responses to Tackling Food Insecurity in the UK**

UK Food Poverty Sector Scoping Review — Snapshot Report

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## **Executive Summary**

Food insecurity is now a persistent feature of life for millions of people across the UK, shaped by a combination of low incomes, rising living costs and deepening financial precarity. This report distils the core findings of an independent scoping review of the UK food insecurity sector conducted by Nick Hopkins, commissioned by Comic Relief as part of the Nourish the Nation programme co-funded with Sainsbury's. Drawing on over 80 interviews with more than 65 organisations, it highlights both the structural drivers of food insecurity - such as inadequate income, high housing and energy costs, and inequalities across demographic groups - and how policy makers and the community food sector are responding to it.

This report begins by presenting the state of food insecurity in the UK and the policy directions being pursued across the four nations to tackle it. It then examines the practical responses from the community food sector - comprised of foodbanks and affordable food providers from food redistribution networks and from local food insecurity partnerships - and how these models are evolving in response to sustained demand. The report goes on to explore how people use these services, who they reach and what impact they have. It highlights the important role of advice and wraparound support, increasingly recognised as a key way of addressing the underlying drivers of food insecurity and enabling people to move beyond crisis and build long-term financial stability. The paper then considers the pressures on the sector, and explores key live debates, from the importance of expanding cash-first approaches to the question of how to grow the supply of surplus food and ensure the sustainability of affordable retail. Finally, it sets out reflections for the community food sector and funders on how to strengthen local response ecosystems, reduce crisis dependency and support more dignified and long-term responses to food insecurity.

## Glossary

**Food insecurity:** People experience food insecurity when due to a lack of available income, they reduce the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets. They experience severe food insecurity/ very low food security when due to a lack of available income, they reduce their food intake or disrupt their eating patterns. People may experience food crisis when they cannot meet immediate food needs, or chronic food insecurity when their ability to afford the food they need is constrained over time.

**Food poverty:** People experience food poverty if, due to a lack of income, they cannot, or are uncertain about whether they can, acquire an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways.

**Destitution:** People experience destitution when due to a lack of available income they are not able to afford household essentials, which can include food, heating, clothing, lighting, toiletries or shelter.

**Community Food Sector:** The community food sector is understood in this report to denote the sector comprising foodbanks and the diverse range of voluntary and community organisations providing or selling food at low or no cost, largely to people on low incomes.

**Affordable Food Sector:** The affordable food sector comprises the second part of the community food sector described above. Different terms, explored below, used by and about organisations within this sector include 'affordable food clubs', 'pantries', 'larders', and 'social supermarkets'.

**Clients:** People using foodbanks and wraparound services are referred to in the report as clients.

**Customers and Members:** People using the affordable food sector are referred to in the report as customers, or as members when that reflects the language in relevant research and the common usage by the affordable food sector when the membership nature of their work is relevant.

## Understanding Food Insecurity in the UK

Food insecurity in the UK is widespread, persistent as an issue and closely linked to poverty.

Just over one in five people - around 14.3 million - are living in poverty, including 4.3 million children and 1.9 million pensioners.<sup>1</sup> Although headline rates of poverty resemble those seen before the covid-19 pandemic, they obscure the fact that poverty is not always a static state and has different degrees of depth: people move in and out of poverty, and in and out of deep poverty. In fact, the depth and severity of poverty have worsened over the last decade: 6 million people now live in very deep poverty, and the income gap separating them from the poverty line continues to widen. Destitution, the deepest form of poverty has risen sharply over that time, now affecting 3.8 million people per year, including one million children.<sup>2</sup>

The same financial pressures that push people into poverty also restrict their ability to afford adequate food. Financial precarity, closely associated with low income, i.e. being unable to cope with financial shocks, is the strongest predictor of food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> According to a 2025 Food Standards Agency (FSA) survey,<sup>4</sup> 21% of adults in England, Wales and Northern Ireland reported being food insecure at some point over the previous year, split almost evenly between those compromising on quality and variety of food and those reducing intake or skipping meals entirely. Rapid food price inflation during the cost-of-living crisis has been central to changes in levels of food insecurity. Between 2021 and 2024, overall prices rose by more than 20% and food prices by over 30%, with increases felt most acutely by low-income households, who spend a larger share of their budgets on food.<sup>5</sup>

Those most likely to be food insecure include households with children, people on low incomes, those who are long-term unemployed, people in larger households, Asian British households, and disabled people or those with long-term conditions. Data shows that many people experiencing food insecurity worry constantly about food running out, others report food not lasting and a lack of money to buy more. Many have changed their

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025). UK Poverty 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Fitzpatrick, S., et al. (2023). Destitution in the UK 2023. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Financial precarity measured as being to absorb a sudden £100 expenditure Blake, M. (forthcoming). Food Clubs—A Strategic Pathway to UK Food Security and Wellbeing.

<sup>4</sup> Moore, A., et al. (2025). Food and You, Wave 9: Key Findings. Food Standards Agency.

<sup>5</sup> Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2024). United Kingdom Food Security Report 2024.

eating patterns to cope, some skip meals for whole days or rely on lower quality or reduced-price food.<sup>6</sup> Real terms spending on food is lower than it was before the pandemic, with people consuming less, or spending on food of lower quality.<sup>7</sup>

The consequences of food insecurity extend beyond diet. Food insecurity impacts negatively on people's physical and mental health, children's educational outcomes and wellbeing, social connection and isolation. There is also a relationship between obesity and low income, and therefore food insecurity, with 71.5% of adults overweight in the most deprived areas of England.

In turn, food insecurity places substantial on costs on the public purse. Trussell's recent Hunger and Hardship report put a price tag of £75.6bn on the reduced employment and productivity, lower tax revenue, higher social security payments, and increased spending on public services, particularly health services, that it generates.<sup>8</sup>

A growing share of people turn to the community food sector to cope with food insecurity. The 2025 FSA survey reported that 4% of people have used a foodbank and 5% have accessed affordable food providers in the last year, while Trussell identified the same proportions of people accessing foodbanks and affordable food providers, alongside 2% using a soup kitchen or similar.<sup>9,10</sup>

As food insecurity levels remain high and demand on community food provision grows, the consequences for health, wellbeing and public services highlight the need for coordinated action and a long-term policy response.

## **Policy Response**

National and devolved governments recognise that reducing poverty is fundamental to tackling food insecurity and are responding with action on benefits, including crisis response, poverty more broadly and food policy.

At the UK level, and as the centrepiece of the Government's Child Poverty Strategy, the most significant recent policy shift has been the abolition of the two-child limit on

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<sup>6</sup> Moore, A., et al. (2025). Food and You, Wave 9: Key Findings. Food Standards Agency.

<sup>7</sup> Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2024). United Kingdom Food Security Report 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Weekes, T., Rabindrakumar, S., Padgett, S., & Ball, E. (2024). The Cost of Hunger and Hardship: Interim Report. Trussell Trust.

<sup>9</sup> Trussell Trust (2025). Hunger in the UK.

<sup>10</sup> Moore, A., et al. (2025). Food and You, Wave 9: Key Findings. Food Standards Agency.

Universal Credit, which is projected to reduce child poverty substantially.<sup>11</sup> Alongside this, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is developing an action plan to end mass dependence on emergency food aid, a recognition that charitable food aid should not remain a systemic feature of the welfare landscape.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has also released a policy paper intended as a framework for a 'Good Food Cycle'<sup>12</sup>, which aims to improve affordability, dietary health, environmental sustainability and system resilience - drawing heavily on Henry Dimbleby's National Food Strategy.<sup>13</sup> Delivery of these commitments is expected to rely on a multi-sector partnership approach involving businesses, local government, civil society and communities.

England delivers crisis support primarily through locally administered welfare assistance, historically under-funded and highly uneven across local authorities. Since 2021, the Household Support Fund (HSF) has acted as the main funding mechanism stabilising local crisis provision, representing around two-thirds of the cost of local welfare assistance schemes.<sup>14</sup> The HSF will transition into a new Crisis and Resilience Fund from 2026/27,<sup>15</sup> giving local authorities continued flexibility to provide direct payments to residents and to fund advice services and affordable food interventions, depending on local priorities. Concerns remain about whether funding will be adequate and stable enough to meet demand, especially given that local authorities may make differing choices about how far to invest in cash-first, advice-based or community-food-sector responses.

In Scotland and Wales, cash-based support to people in crisis is provided in a way largely reflecting the previous DWP Social Fund, through the Scottish Welfare Fund and Discretionary Assistance Fund respectively. Northern Ireland's approach through its Discretionary Support scheme is not too dissimilar, although with some emphasis on loans rather than grants.

At the time of writing, Northern Ireland was consulting on its anti-poverty strategy, framed around reducing risk, mitigating impact and enabling pathways out of poverty.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> HM Government (2025), Removing the Two-Child Limit on Universal Credit: Impact Analysis

<sup>12</sup> Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2025), A Government Food Strategy for England

<sup>13</sup> Dimbleby, H. (2021), National Food Strategy: The Plan

<sup>14</sup> A Bleak Future For Crisis Support, End Furniture Poverty (2024)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/crisis-and-resilience-fund-guidance-for-local-authorities-in-england-1-april-2026-to-31-march-2029>

<sup>16</sup> Northern Ireland Executive (2025), Anti-Poverty Strategy (Consultation Document)

While the strategy is high level and acknowledges substantial budgetary constraints, it commits to improving access to high-quality advice, promoting uptake of benefits, and supporting families. Northern Ireland has also developed a Food Strategy Framework<sup>17</sup>, which uses a food systems lens and places emphasis on improving dietary health and accessibility to nutritious food, while recognising the role of community organisations in addressing food insecurity. Together, these emerging strategies indicate a direction of travel towards more coordinated responses, albeit with more limited resourcing compared to England, Scotland and Wales.

Scotland has taken the most ambitious stance in the UK with respect to food insecurity. The Scottish Government's Cash First approach articulates a clear vision for emergency food aid as a last resort. In this model, crisis responses prioritise rapid access to emergency cash, income maximisation and wrap-around support, ensuring that help is both dignified and geared toward resolving underlying financial pressures.<sup>18</sup> Practical actions under the strategy include investment in cash first pilots, expansion of advice in community settings, and improvements to the Scottish Welfare Fund, although there are severe pressures on funding for the latter in many local authorities.

This approach is now set in the context of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act<sup>19</sup> and its accompanying national plan<sup>20</sup>, which sets statutory expectations for national and local food planning, including explicit commitments to reduce food insecurity and improve the quality, affordability and cultural appropriateness of food.

Wales has adopted a systems-oriented approach in its Community Food Strategy,<sup>21</sup> which sits alongside a wider child poverty strategy<sup>22</sup> focused on reducing the costs families face and maximising income. The Community Food Strategy commits to strengthening food resilience through local partnerships established in every local authority, supporting a shift beyond reliance on foodbanks, and improving access to surplus, locally produced and sustainably sourced food. Wales has also allocated additional investment to community food initiatives, infrastructure for redistribution (including FareShare Cymru, the largest

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<sup>17</sup> Northern Ireland Executive (2024), Food Strategy Framework: Food at the Heart of Our Society

<sup>18</sup> Scottish Government (2023), Cash First, Towards Ending the Need for Foodbanks in Scotland

<sup>19</sup> Scottish Government (2022), Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act

<sup>20</sup> Scottish Government (2024), National Good Food Nation Plan

<sup>21</sup> Welsh Government (2025), Wales Community Food Strategy

<sup>22</sup> Welsh Government (2024), Child Poverty Strategy for Wales

surplus food redistribution charity in Wales), and activities that address the root causes of food poverty.

## **Practical Responses from the Community Food Sector**

The community food sector is comprised of two interlinked elements: food banks and the affordable food sector.

Foodbanks provide crisis support, most commonly through referral-based models, such as those in the Trussell network, which offer time-limited parcels designed to last a few days, often based around ambient and cupboard food. However, independent foodbanks vary widely, with many smaller providers operating less formally and with fewer access restrictions.

There has been a huge growth in the sector over the last 20 years, with over 400 Trussell foodbanks delivering from 1,700 locations, and over 1,200 independent foodbanks in operation UK-wide. Many foodbanks have integrated advice and other services into their offer, recognising that food crisis is often driven by unresolved issues relating to income, benefits, debt or housing.<sup>23</sup>

Alongside foodbanks, the affordable food sector – including food clubs, pantries, larders and social supermarkets - has expanded rapidly, with providers aiming to provide choice, and dignified long-term options at a price below commercial retail for people facing chronic food insecurity. Models vary widely by sourcing, pricing, access (including referral-only models or waiting lists) and frequency of opening. Many affordable food providers are run by community anchor organisations or national operators working through local partners, with a common emphasis on creating a welcoming retail-style environment that reduces stigma and enables deeper, sustained engagement with members. As with foodbanks, many also host wraparound support such as welfare rights advice, debt support, employability provision and health outreach, aiming to reach people who would not otherwise engage with services.<sup>24</sup> Many also deliver wrap around activities, including community growing and cookery classes, dependent on the availability of land and facilities.

The community food sector is supported by a range of national infrastructure organisations. The Trussell network is the most prominent national infrastructure for foodbanks, whilst many independent providers are members of the Independent Food

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<sup>23</sup> IFAN. Mapping the Independent Food Aid Network.

<sup>24</sup> Lopez, A., Defeyter, M. A., Stretesky, P., Forsey, A., & Edom-Bray, R. (2025). Feeding Community: The Role of Affordable Food Clubs in Building Resilient Communities. Feeding Britain.

Aid Network (IFAN). The affordable food sector is more diverse, without a single pre-eminent body, but is supported by a few national organisations who operate franchise models, directly run provision, or seek to support the sector with advice and support.

Both food banks and the affordable food sector, but particularly the latter, make significant use of the food redistribution sector, which channels surplus food from retailers, manufacturers and farms to frontline organisations. There are variations in the operational and financial models involved, with local food distribution hubs and affordable food providers collectively directly accessing surplus, as well as national operators- Fareshare and its partners are collectively the largest players and have organisational capacity to handle different types of food.

The voluntary sector has also played a significant role in two key initiatives aimed at reducing food insecurity amongst children: the Holiday Activities and Food Programme, funded by the UK Government between 2021/22 and 2028/29, which matches activities with the provision of food for children on free school meals in the main school holidays; and the expansion of the breakfast clubs programme as the Government moves to fulfil its manifesto promise of a club in every primary school.

## **Usage and Impact of the Community Food Sector**

The profile of people turning to foodbanks and affordable food providers generally reflects that of those in poverty or food insecurity. Evidence links foodbank use to very low income, financial precarity and severe financial stress, underclaiming or difficulties with benefits, weaker support networks and social isolation, and exposure to destabilising life events such as homelessness, disability onset, relationship breakdown or domestic abuse.<sup>25</sup>

Many face barriers to accessing the community food sector, including stigma, a belief that others “need it more”, or lack of awareness, notably private renters in need are less likely to be referred than social renters. Over the cost-of-living crisis, many food banks observed rising frequency of use per client, even as some reported small falls in total volumes of food packages provided.<sup>26</sup>

Evaluations of affordable food clubs show reductions in food insecurity and increases in fruit and vegetable consumption over time, alongside improvements in social connectedness and multiple aspects of wellbeing. The longer people use affordable food provision, the more likely they are to become food secure. These settings can act as a

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<sup>25</sup> Trussell Trust (2025). Hunger in the UK.

<sup>26</sup> Trussell Trust (2025). Emergency Food Parcel Distribution in the UK, 2024–25.

bridge to other services, with evidence that integrated advice in affordable food providers reduces repeat usage and that membership correlates with greater engagement in support and activities. The sector's ability to offer choice and dignity is consistently valued by customers, as is the stability that comes from predictable, weekly access to affordable staples.<sup>27</sup>

## **Strategic Work, Advocacy and Public Understanding**

Local food partnerships play a critical role in shaping place-based responses to food insecurity that encompass food access, income maximisation, redistribution logistics, health outcomes and neighbourhood assets. Partnerships are effective where they combine wide information-sharing with focused multi-agency action plans, and clear links to anti-poverty structures. For many partnerships, Feeding Britain has been a key resource, particularly in the early stages of development, through the provision of direct advice, the sharing of good practice, and the provision of funding for partnership-related activities and service development. However, more generally funding for local partnerships is uneven, and some areas lack coordinated structures or links into wider local anti-poverty work.

At national level, the community food sector has advocated for policy changes to reduce poverty, improve the social security system and expand cash-first responses. Trussell have led the 'Guarantee Our Essentials' campaign in conjunction with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, reflecting their core belief that the need for foodbanks should be ended. This campaign argues that, amongst other changes, the basic rate of Universal Credit should be set at a level which covers the cost of household essentials including food, household bills and travel.<sup>28</sup>

Organisations within the food redistribution sector have focused on campaigning for the use of tax incentives and grants to direct more surplus food towards human consumption, diverting it from being used for anaerobic digestion or animal feed.<sup>29</sup>

Shifting public understanding has been both a strategic priority and an operational necessity for the community food sector, given its reliance on donations and volunteers. Organisations have invested in social media and storytelling while also elevating the voices of people with lived experience in service design and advocacy. For both foodbanks

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<sup>27</sup> Lopez, A., Defeyter, M. A., Stretesky, P., Forsey, A., & Edom-Bray, R. (2025). Feeding Community: The Role of Affordable Food Clubs in Building Resilient Communities. Feeding Britain.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.trussell.org.uk/support-us/guarantee-our-essentials>

<sup>29</sup> <https://fareshare.org.uk/news-media/press-releases/fareshare-launches-sobering-pre-election-manifesto/>

and affordable food providers, doing effective engagement with clients and customers can be difficult when faced with the competing pressures of service delivery.

### **Pressures and Issues Facing the Community Food Sector**

The community food sector is entering a period of sustained pressure after several years in which pandemic-related funding temporarily strengthened organisational capacity, and it is not immune from the wider funding pressures on the voluntary sector.

Foodbanks are facing continued demand whilst donations and grants have fallen and inflation has pushed up the cost of core operations. Many foodbanks expanded rapidly during the pandemic, and this growth created governance demands that small or volunteer-led organisations can find difficult to meet.<sup>30</sup>

Affordable food providers face their own sustainability challenges. Most cannot rely solely on surplus redistribution or donated food from retailers to provide an appropriate variety of stock in the way initially expected, and find themselves purchasing a significant proportion of their food from supermarkets. As a result, membership fees or retail income generally struggle to cover the cost of stock. Where this is the case, it means ongoing subsidy is required - and each additional customer increases the overall subsidy needed. This limits the sector's ability to welcome new members and restricts how often customers can shop. Although some organisations are beginning to move toward 'stock sustainability', covering the costs of purchasing food with income from customers, doing so requires difficult decisions about pricing models, hard work on sourcing strategies to increase the amount of surplus they can depend upon.

Pressures within the food redistribution sector are also impacting on what is available to frontline providers. Many providers highlight growing concerns about the quality and suitability of surplus food they receive, though the redistribution sector expresses more optimism about supply. Both agree that surplus is shifting further back in the supply chain as retailers get better at reducing food waste. The food distribution sector feels that this shift requires new infrastructure - especially cold storage and distribution capacity - to handle more fresh produce. These developments raise policy questions about unlocking farm-gate surplus- an issue explored through recent DEFRA pilots- and the ways redistribution networks prioritise affordable food providers.<sup>31 32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Trussell Trust. Hunger in the UK (2025)

<sup>31</sup> A Government Food Strategy for England, 2025

<sup>32</sup> Defra. United Kingdom Food Security Report 2024

At the same time, wrap-around services - such as welfare advice, debt support, health services and employability programmes - are under intense pressure due to reduced local authority spending.<sup>33</sup> Cuts risk leaving people with increasingly unmet needs and may lead them approaching food provision settings in more severe crisis.<sup>34</sup>

The sector continues to grapple with issues of reach. The report found concerns from providers that suggests some global majority communities remain underserved by affordable food provision, and further research is needed to understand and address these inequalities. Rural communities face additional challenges such as higher prices and transport barriers, and cash availability and travel access in urban areas impacts on patterns of food purchase for people on low incomes, both issues requiring very local, place-specific responses.

The co-ordination of local responses faces challenges. Local food partnerships - central to delivering strategic responses - are unevenly funded, and not always connected to wider anti-poverty structures, limiting their impact. Duplication does not appear to be an issue, although tensions occasionally arise within the food redistribution and community food sectors, diversity within both sectors is generally seen as a strength, reflecting local circumstances, supporting innovation, resilience and flexible responses to fluctuating demand and supply.

The community food sector faces challenges making its policy advocacy, public and lived experience work effective in a difficult fiscal and political environment. Its response will need to articulate ways in which central and devolved Government policy can support the development of effective local mitigation responses alongside pressing for national action on the drivers of food insecurity, and be based on theories of change tied to specific and realistic outcomes.

## **Key Policy Debates**

The sector is currently engaged in several interconnected debates at the heart of responses to food insecurity. Although each debate has distinct implications, together they highlight the limits of national welfare policy, the importance of local mitigation, and the need for coordinated investment in both crisis response and longer-term models of support.

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<sup>33</sup> Save the Local Safety Net Campaign (2025)

<sup>34</sup> Trussell Trust. The Cost of Hunger and Hardship: Interim Report

### ***How much food insecurity can realistically be reduced in the short-medium term?***

#### ***What does it mean if further progress seems unlikely?***

Across the community food sector there is broad agreement that it is the responsibility of the UK Government and devolved administrations to prioritise reducing food insecurity. The sector shares core policy asks: a more generous benefits system that ensures that people can afford their household essentials; work to increase benefit uptake and reduce debt; more jobs, and more stable and better paid jobs, particularly for disabled people; lower household costs, particularly related to rent and energy. The abolition of the two child limit is a very positive change, but there are very significant costs attached to many of the further policy asks, particularly those related to benefits, none of which will, by themselves, end food insecurity, and which would need to be progressed in a politically and fiscally difficult environment for major public spend. The costs of inaction are real, but taking full account of those would require major shifts in the way Governments think about public investment.

If further significant reductions in food insecurity seem unlikely, the community food sector has to consider how to sustain and develop its longer-term mitigation responses at a local level. These interventions are not substitutes for economic justice, but they are essential for stabilising households in a constrained fiscal environment, and without them people in food insecurity would be abandoned.

#### ***How can cash-first approaches respond to food insecurity?***

Cash-first approaches are based on the idea that where possible people facing a food insecurity crisis should be offered cash support. There is consensus from the community food sector that cash-first should be part of the response to crisis. This fits with its emphasis on the state taking responsibility for the issue, and puts cash in the hands of people who can then make their own decisions, offering dignity and choice. Increased Government spending such as the temporary Universal Credit uplift and Scottish Child Payment have shown that targeted additional cash can reduce foodbank use, as have pilot projects such as those under the Scottish Government's Cash First Partnerships. The extent to which cash-first policies can reduce reliance on emergency food will depend heavily on levels of funding, and how support systems are structured and implemented at the local level.

#### ***What should be the role of foodbanks in responding to food insecurity?***

The foodbank sector can evidence that it provides dignified and compassionate support to people in food crisis, but acknowledges the force of criticisms that suggest inherent problems in the work it does. The sector is clear that it should not be needed, that mass

dependence on foodbanks could and should be ended by the Government, and that cash-first approaches should be at the heart of responding to food insecurity. It does not want foodbanks to be institutionalised as part of an accepted response to food insecurity. The sector may also be at, or close to, the limit of the number of people it can support.

However, if major progress on food insecurity is not made, the need for the sector will remain. In campaigning and public engagement terms that will mean a balancing act between pride in its work and stressing the need for investment on the one hand, and the need for system change on the other. In practical terms, it means a continued role in local responses, and a focus on expanding choice, sustaining dignity, and strengthening referral pathways. It also means securing the future of wrap around support, in particular advice embedded in foodbanks, reducing repeat usage and getting to people who would not otherwise have accessed support.

### ***What should be the role of the affordable food sector in responding to food insecurity?***

The affordable food sector believes that it can prevent or reduce foodbank use, give dignity and choice to customers, and use wrap around support and activities to build community connections and get people to the help they need. In contrast to the foodbank sector's desire for self-erasure, the affordable food sector believes that it can be the larger part of local responses across the long term. Critics do suggest that stigma may still attach to the sector as it does to foodbanks, and some criticise its use of surplus food, but the sector offers robust defences against these criticisms based on customer feedback. There are issues about whether the sector is as effective as foodbanks at meeting the needs of people in crisis.

The sector faces significant challenges achieving stock sustainability. Progress has been shown to be possible by combining reliable surplus sourcing and joint purchasing. If stock sustainability can be achieved and investment in core organisational costs secured, the sector has the potential to grow to meet the needs of more people in chronic food insecurity.

### ***What is the role for surplus food provision?***

Surplus food will have an essential role to play in any move towards sustainability for the affordable food sector. Access to that food depends on the strengthening of the sector's relationship with food redistribution partners and the willingness of those partners to prioritise the sector, and/ or the sector's willingness to itself get involved in surplus food redistribution. Pressures on supermarket surplus mean volumes are likely to fall and competition for what remains will intensify, requiring food redistribution to tap into

less-utilised sources further up the supply chain, including manufacturers and farms. Realising this potential will demand new ways of working and investment in infrastructure (such as storage, packaging and food-handling capacity) to make effective use of a broader range of surplus. While some critics view reliance on surplus as problematic because of variability of supply and quality, the affordable food and food redistribution sectors reject claims that they trade in unusable or inappropriate food, and emphasise their role in diverting unavoidable surplus to the public good.

### ***What role for wrap around support?***

Advice provision linked to the community food sector cannot meet the needs of all its clients and customers, but it can ensure that many people who would otherwise have missed out on support access the help they need, and avoid future crises, or become less food insecure. Stronger referral routes to other provision can also have a major impact.

There are concerns about how wraparound provision can be sustained at a time of public sector austerity. There have always been areas less well served by the advice sector, but there are a growing number of advice deserts in England, and fears that more may be created as cuts bite, alongside concerns that services linked to the community food sector will be lost when organisations facing cuts pull back to their core and away from outreach. The community food sector may be able to identify funding to partly replace cuts made to the advice sector. It can also advocate for investment in such services, sharing evidence of their impact on food insecurity, to ensure that impact is fully understood by decision makers.

## **Conclusions and Reflections**

Over the past two decades, voluntary organisations have built a significant community food sector in response to rising food insecurity, yet current provision does not reach the majority of those affected. Both foodbanks and affordable food providers now face real sustainability challenges at the same time as their roles, alongside cash-first support and wrap-around help, have been acknowledged as central to effective local mitigation. Strengthening the local response ecosystem requires sustained investment in frontline organisations, the partnerships that coordinate them, and the national infrastructure that supports them and advocates for long-term solutions to poverty and food insecurity. Below are reflections on practical actions that the community food sector and funders need to take.

### ***Reflections for the community food sector:***

The community food sector should advocate for central Government to require every local authority to develop a strategy to mitigate food insecurity, and for it to provide support for

authorities to do so. Establishing this expectation nationally would create a framework for local action and ensure that food insecurity is addressed systematically.

As joint policy advocacy increases at a national level, both parts of the community food sector should strengthen their relationships with each other - nationally and locally deepening mutual understanding and support between foodbanks and affordable food providers- and with redistribution organisations and other partners, and consolidating a more coherent, collegiate and effective response across the system.

***Reflections for funders:***

Investment is needed in strategic work to build and sustain local ecosystems of support. These should encompass cash-first responses, foodbank provision, the affordable food sector and wrap-around services, and strengthen referral links, both within the community food ecosystem and with wider public and voluntary services. Success will mean people experiencing food insecurity receiving dignified, timely, coordinated and effective help, appropriate to their needs.

In particular, to deliver these responses, investment will be required in:

- The community anchor organisations that are often key to developing and hosting the community food sector.
- Cash-first support as the widely publicised default response to the needs of people facing food crisis.
- Foodbanks; from statutory funders for staff and infrastructure, and from non-statutory funders unrestricted funds to meet core costs including food purchase.
- The affordable food sector's staffing costs and physical infrastructure, and support for its transition to stock sustainability.
- Advice and other wrap-around services and activities.
- Provision that meets the needs of people from global majority communities.
- Truly local provision that responds to access challenges in rural and some urban areas.
- Local multi-agency and multi-sectoral partnerships with clear reporting lines to other structures to develop and deliver the strategies.

There should be investment in the capacity of the food redistribution sector to adapt to shifting surplus availability. As volumes and types of surplus change, redistributors will

need the infrastructure, logistics and resources to respond effectively, investment could come with an expectation that the affordable food sector is prioritised.

National infrastructure within the community food sector itself requires investment so that frontline organisations can be better supported to meet the pressures they face, sustain service quality, ensure robust governance, continue to develop good practice and respond to changes in demand or supply.

Investment is also needed to build the sector's capacity for research, policy influence and public engagement. Strengthening these functions will enable community food organisations to generate robust evidence, shape public debate, and ensure lived experience informs national policy. This includes research to understand the experiences of global majority and rural and specific urban communities in accessing community food provision.

Finally, there should be investment in the development of genuinely innovative and disruptive thinking within the sector, to adapt to a changing environment and to build longer-term, more resilient solutions to food insecurity.