Food Clubs: A Strategic Pathway to UK Food Security and Wellbeing

Summary and Strategic Insights from a Large-Scale Comparative Study

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This report presents a strategic synthesis of findings from the larger study, **Building Resilience: The Role of Food Clubs in UK Food Security**, by Dr Megan K Blake (University of Sheffield). The research was commissioned by Comic Relief as part of Sainsbury's Nourish the Nation programme (UoS Project 12570).

About this research

The findings are based on a study of 14,156 adults from lower-income households in England and Scotland, conducted by YouGov in mid-2025. In what is believed to be the first large-scale study of its kind, the research's key strength is its comparative design, surveying both food club users and a demographically similar group of non-users. The survey targeted households with an annual income below £40,000 residing in the most deprived 60% of neighbourhoods to ensure the data captured those most at risk of food insecurity. A combination of descriptive statistics and advanced regression modelling was used to first profile the circumstances of different households and then to provide a controlled comparison of outcomes, enabling the analysis to isolate the statistical associations between food club engagement and key indicators of food security, diet, and wellbeing.

The study's cross-sectional design means the analysis identifies powerful associations but cannot prove causation. The findings are also based on self-reported data, and the online, opt-in panel methodology is susceptible to selection bias and excludes individuals without internet access. Despite these limitations, the large sample size and rigorous comparative design provide a robust and trustworthy evidence base for the findings and recommendations presented. *(For full details, please see the Methodology section of the full report.)*

About the Author

Dr. Megan Blake is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography at the University of Sheffield, where she is an internationally recognised expert on household food security. Her research adopts a geographical perspective to examine the social, political, and economic drivers of food insecurity in the UK. A central focus of Dr. Blake's work is the 'Food Ladders' framework, a community-based strategy designed to build long-term resilience by moving beyond emergency food provision to foster sustainable solutions. Her research, which includes work on the value of surplus food, has a significant impact on policy and practice. She has provided oral evidence to parliamentary committees, informs government departments including the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Work and Pensions, and is a prominent public academic with media appearances on national platforms such as the BBC, Sky News, and in print media.

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Introduction: A Blueprint for Resilience

This report presents findings from the first large-scale, independent analysis of the affordable food club model in the UK, moving beyond case studies to provide robust, quantitative evidence of its impact. It offers a new, hopeful, and practical blueprint for building household and community resilience, grounded in a conceptual journey that challenges established narratives and provides a clear pathway forward. To frame the analysis this report uses the ‘Food Ladders’ model, a framework designed to help communities map the journey from food insecurity to long-term resilience.

The report begins by reframing food insecurity, moving the debate away from the dominant narrative of temporary emergencies to understanding it as a prolonged, structural precarity. The analysis argues that this precarity is rooted not in individual choices or failings, but in the conditions created by wider external circumstances. The evidence demonstrates that for many, the core issue is a profound lack of resilience—foundations so fragile they cannot withstand the recurring pressures of everyday life. It is here that the spiralling nature of the crisis begins. The initial damage of structural financial instability quickly leads to compounding social and psychological harms, such as isolation and poor mental health, which in turn make it even harder for households to rebuild.

This reframing of the problem demands a corresponding shift in the solution. Interventions designed for short-term emergencies are often implicitly based on a 'deficit model', which views people as lacking skills or resources that need to be provided for them. This report challenges that perspective. The evidence reveals that households navigating hardship are highly resourceful, often possessing sophisticated skills in areas like cooking and budgeting, which they have developed out of necessity to manage their precarious circumstances. An effective response, therefore, must be an asset-based one that works *with* people, respecting the capabilities they already have. It must focus on repairing the cracked structural foundations of their lives rather than attempting to fix supposed deficits in their character or knowledge.

It is within this context that the report presents the affordable food club as a model that embodies this asset-based approach and provides the evidence to prove its effectiveness. Distinct from the emergency food bank model, food clubs are membership-based schemes where, for a low cost, members can receive a range of groceries, including fresh produce. The model's philosophy is one of ‘doing with’ people, not ‘doing to’ them; it operates on principles of exchange and reciprocity that affirm agency and provide a dignified, non-stigmatising pathway to food security. A unifying feature is the commitment to providing 'more-than-food' support—such as co-located debt advice—which aims to repair the cracked foundations that lead to hardship. To substantiate this approach, the report will first provide a detailed profile of the households who use this model and present clear evidence of its multifaceted positive impact on their financial resilience, diet, and wellbeing. *(The food club model and its different operational forms are described in detail in the Building Resilience report, under the heading "The Role of Food Clubs on the ‘Food Ladders’".)*

To analyse the distinct role of this model, the report situates it within the wider ecosystem of support using the ‘Food Ladders’—a framework that conceptualises a household's journey from crisis towards resilience. This framework visualises the different pathways people use to get food as a series of three rungs. The goal is not just to 'catch' people on the bottom rung in an emergency, but to provide stable, higher rungs that allow them to build their own capacity and then shape their own food futures. This report focuses on the first two rungs: Rung 1 (crisis response), which includes emergency services like food banks, and Rung 2 (capacity building), which encompasses a range of developmental initiatives like food clubs. By systematically comparing the users and impacts of these different models, the report provides the first large-scale, evidence-based test of this framework in practice.

Finally, the report concludes by exploring the journeys people take away from support, introducing a new and positive metric for success. The analysis reveals that for many, leaving a food club is not a sign of the service's failure, but of its success in fulfilling its Rung 2 purpose. The report identifies a 'Successful Transition' journey, where over a fifth of former members are 'pulled' away by their own restored resilience. The finding that becoming food secure is the most potent predictor of a member leaving provides the clearest evidence of the model's success. This offers a powerful, evidence-based vision for what an effective, empowering, and dignified support system can achieve.

This summary report follows this conceptual arc, presenting the evidence that underpins this new blueprint for a more resilient and food-secure future.

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1. The Architecture of Hardship: Understanding the Foundations of the Crisis

The report begins its detailed analysis by examining the structural context that shapes a household's daily struggle with food insecurity. It uses an established international framework from the United Nations that identifies four essential pillars—Access, Availability, Utilisation, and Stability—and provides evidence of systemic challenges across all four. Overall, the research found that more than one in five (21.8%) of the low-income households surveyed were experiencing food-related hardship. (*See the 'Quantifying Food Insecurity in the Survey Population' section and Table 1 in the Building Resilience report.*)

1.1 Cracked Foundations: The challenge of Access and Stability

The analysis shows that while low income is a foundational issue, the more acute problem is a profound lack of resilience. A household's financial situation is often a 'cracked foundation,' leaving it in a constant state of precarity and vulnerable to the smallest shock.

'I've been poor for so long that I've learned to live on one main meal plus one snack a day. I think most people would class that as 'skipping' a meal, but for me, that's just normal, and has been for many years now.'

- **Lack of financial resilience is the most powerful risk factor.** The strongest predictor of food insecurity is a household's inability to afford a necessary but unexpected £100 expense without borrowing. This absence of even a small financial buffer increases the odds of food insecurity by 517%. It is also widespread—affecting 27.1% of all households surveyed—and cuts across all income brackets in the sample. *(See the 'Access: The ability to afford food' and 'Stability: Resilience to Shocks' subsections of the Building Resilience report. See Tables 11 & 12 for the full predictive model.)*
- **A full-time wage does not prevent food insecurity.** For many households, regular employment does not guarantee stability. The data shows that 11.4% of full-time workers still live in households with incomes below the £20,000 poverty threshold, demonstrating that wages alone are often insufficient to protect against precarity. *(See the 'Access' subsection and Table 3 in the Building Resilience report.)*

'Most people think I should be able to afford things because I am a nurse, but that is far from the truth. [The food club] has gone some way into stopping the stress and worrying about where the family's next meal is coming from, more so as the cost of living is so high, and I'm constantly living on my credit cards to get by.'

- **Housing and caring responsibilities intensify financial strain.** Financial vulnerability is amplified by other structural circumstances that weaken a household's foundations. Compared to homeowners, the odds of a household being food insecure are significantly higher for those in social housing (86.9% higher) and the private rental sector (85.6% higher). Respondents with full-time caring responsibilities for someone with a long-term

health condition further increase the risk by 73.6%. *(See Table 12 in the Building Resilience report for the complete predictive model.)*

1.2 Shifting Ground: The Challenges of Availability and Utilisation

The report demonstrates that many households must build their lives on 'shifting ground,' where their external environment is unequal and their internal capacity to cope is diminished by structural pressures.

- **Local food access depends on geography, not choice.** The analysis shows that many households—especially in rural areas—face structural barriers to accessing fresh, nutritious food. Over half (52.5%) of rural respondents report having no shop selling fresh produce within a 20-minute walk. Regression modelling confirms this is not due to personal preference or mobility: rural households are more than 14 times more likely than urban households to face these access challenges. This reveals a structural inequality in the 'geography of food', where location itself limits resilience. (*See the 'Availability' section and Tables 4 & 5 in the Building Resilience report.*)

'Access in rural areas is a key problem. 'Village life' or a 'country way of life' is not all it's cracked up to be.'

- **The 'Cooking Skills Paradox' reveals deeper structural causes**. Most food-insecure respondents report average to very good cooking confidence, and a slightly higher proportion rate their skills as 'very good' than food-secure households. This indicates that cooking ability is often a sign of learned resourcefulness rather than a shield against hardship. At the same time, confidence is more polarised among food-insecure households, with a small increase in those reporting very low skills. This reinforces that cooking initiatives alone cannot address food insecurity—the core issue lies in the structural conditions households are navigating. *(See the 'Food Utilisation' subsection and Tables 8 & 12 in the Building Resilience report.)*
- **Poor health and time poverty reduce food access and use.** The main barriers to using food effectively are poor health and a lack of time. Being unable to work due to a long-term health condition is associated with a 65.0% increase in the odds of food insecurity, while full-time caring responsibilities for someone with a long-term health condition raise the risk by 73.6%. These pressures limit income, but also reduce the time, energy, and capacity needed for shopping, cooking, and eating well. *(See the 'Food Utilisation' subsection and Table 12 in the Building Resilience report.)*

1.3 More Than an Outcome: The Compounding Harms of Precarity

As the preceding sections have shown, food insecurity is the outcome of a wider system of structural precarity, where a household's 'cracked foundations' and 'shifting ground' leave them perpetually vulnerable. This state is not simply a passive outcome of financial hardship; once it takes hold, it becomes an active force that causes its own cascading, non-financial harms, turning a systemic problem into a public health issue.

- **Food insecurity takes a severe toll on mental health.** The data shows a strong association between living with food insecurity and poor mental health. Individuals in food-insecure households are nearly three times more likely to rate their mental health as poor (39.2%) compared with those in food-secure households (13.2%). This reflects the cumulative psychological strain of coping with ongoing uncertainty and hardship. (*See the 'Food Utilisation' subsection and Table 10 in the Building Resilience report.*)
- **Hardship causes a cascade of physical health impacts.** Food insecurity is also linked to substantially worse physical health outcomes. Households experiencing it are twice as likely to report poor physical health (36.4%) compared to food-secure households (18.1%). This relationship is intensified by the disproportionate number of people in the food-insecure group who are unable to work due to long-term health

conditions (20.2% vs. 5.6%) (*See the 'Food Utilisation' subsection and Table 10 in the Building Resilience report.*)

2. The Role of Food Clubs: A Strategic Tool for Managing Precarity

Having established the architecture of hardship, the report moves on to examine the food club model as a strategic response. This section focuses specifically on this Rung 2 intervention—a proactive, membership-based platform that enables households to manage precarity with dignity by providing consistent access to affordable food. It first profiles the households that use this model before a later section provides a direct comparison with other forms of support. *(For a full description of the food club model, its different operational forms, and its position within the 'Food Ladders' framework, please see the Building Resilience report under the heading "The Role of Food Clubs".)*

2.1 A Profile of Engagement: A Preventive Strategy for Households Under Pressure

The research provides clear evidence that food clubs are a vital resource for households navigating widespread precarity, fulfilling a crucial dual role of both support and prevention.

- **Food clubs help households manage and prevent precarity.** The analysis shows that food clubs are used by households whose foundations are under strain. Current members are three times more likely to be food insecure (38.3%) than non-users (12.6%), demonstrating that the model is reaching those already experiencing structural instability. At the same time, a majority of members (61.7%) remain food secure but use the club to reinforce their foundations and stop cracks from deepening. This confirms the dual role of food clubs: repairing damage where hardship has already taken hold, while also strengthening resilience to prevent further structural decline. (*See Table 13 in the Building Resilience report for the comparative data on food insecurity levels.*)
- **Food clubs are used as a long-term strategy.** Rather than acting as a short-term intervention, food clubs are embedded in how households sustainably manage ongoing precarity. Over half of members (56.7%) have been involved for more than a year, and 52.0% visit at least weekly. This demonstrates that food clubs provide consistent, trusted support that households rely on as part of their long-term coping strategy. (*See Tables 15 & 16 in the Building Resilience report for details on membership duration and frequency.*)

2.2 Factors Associated with Food Club Use

The analysis draws on a predictive model of food club use to provide clear statistical evidence of the specific compounding pressures associated with engagement.

- **Households with children are the most likely to use food clubs.** Families with children are significantly more likely to engage, with the odds of membership rising by 93.8% for those with one or two children and by 150.4% for households with three or more. *(See Table 20 in the Building Resilience report for the complete predictive model of food club use.)*
- **Food clubs help households manage in-work poverty.** Nearly a quarter (23.3%) of food club users are in full-time employment, demonstrating that a consistent wage is not always enough to avoid precarity. Unlike acute emergencies that may trigger food bank use, food clubs support those managing the chronic strain of low-paid or insecure work.

(See 'The Architecture of Engagement' subsection and Table 20 in the Building Resilience report.)

- **Caring responsibilities increase the likelihood of membership.** Households with full-time caring responsibilities for someone with a long-term health condition or disability are 58.3% more likely to use a food club. *(This finding is from the predictive model of food club use, detailed in Table 20 of the Building Resilience report.)*

2.3 Untapped Potential: Barriers to Initial Access

While highly effective for their members, the report identifies significant strategic challenges that currently limit the model's national reach.

- **Awareness is the biggest barrier to accessing a food club.** Less than a quarter of all low-income respondents (21.8%) knew what a food club was before it was defined for them in the survey. However, once explained, over a third (36.5%) of non-users said they would consider using one, highlighting an enormous, untapped potential. *(See the 'The Role of Awareness in Accessing Support' subsection and Table 14 in the Building Resilience report.)*

'Communication is lacking; there are many people who are really struggling who simply do not know where to get help from.'

- **Food clubs are underrepresented in rural areas.** Rural households are notably underrepresented among current food club users (4.1%) compared to their proportion among non-users (8.5%), highlighting a key gap in service provision. (*See the 'Urban-Rural Distinctions' subsection and Table 19 in the Building Resilience report.*)
- **The model reaches both high-need and adjacent communities.** Nearly half of food club users (47.9%) live in the most deprived neighbourhoods (IMD 1), confirming that the model reaches high-need areas. However, over a third (33.8%) live in IMD Quintile 2 and almost one in five (18.3%) in Quintile 3, showing its relevance in less deprived but still precarious communities. (*See 'Index of Multiple Deprivation' subsection and Table 18 in the Building Resilience report.*)

3. The Impact of Food Clubs: A Holistic Model for a Compounding Crisis

The evidence is clear and compelling: engagement with a food club is associated with a significant positive impact on the lives of its members. The data shows that the effect of a food club extends far beyond the provision of affordable groceries. It is a holistic response that helps repair the broader, non-financial harms caused by a state of precarity. (*This analysis is detailed in 'The Impact of Food Clubs: Shoring Up the Foundations of Resilience' section of the Building Resilience report.*)

'It is one degree above the absolute poverty of accepting help from local food banks, the [Food Club] allows cheaper food purchase with dignity... On weeks where money has been tight, it has allowed me to be able to feed my family better … it is less embarrassing than having to beg for a voucher at the food bank!'

3.1 Improving Food Security and Financial Resilience

The model's most immediate reported impact is on a household's financial foundations. By providing a regular, predictable source of highly discounted food, food clubs create crucial budgeting headroom that helps to shore up a household's stability.

- **Members report reduced hardship and worry.** Since joining, 72.2% of members skip meals less often and 74.1% feel less worried about feeding their families. Financial strain is also eased, with 93.4% saying the club helps them stretch their budget. (*See the 'Financial resilience' subsection in the Building Resilience report.)*
- **Longer and more sustained engagement is linked to better outcomes.** The analysis shows a clear *dose-response relationship*—a pattern where increased exposure leads to greater benefit. Members who had only recently joined had the highest risk of food insecurity, with those joining in the last month having **227% higher odds** of being food insecure than those engaged for over a year. In contrast, members using the club just once a month had **67.3% lower odds** of being food secure compared to those visiting more than once a week. This suggests that sustained, regular use of food clubs helps households build stability over time. (*See the 'Financial resilience' subsection and Table 21 in the Building Resilience report.*)
- **Food clubs reduce reliance on emergency services.** For members also using food banks, the club can serve as a pathway towards reduced crisis reliance. Nearly a third (30.7%) of members who also use food banks report doing so less since joining a food club—an effect that grows with continued engagement. *(See the 'Profiling Service Users' and Tables 25 and 26 in the Building Resilience report.)*

3.2 Associated with Improved Nutrition

The analysis shows that engagement with a food club is strongly associated with members reporting better nutrition, primarily by solving the core issues of affordability and consistent access to fresh produce.

- **Members report a stronger sense of eating well.** A much higher proportion of current food club users rate their diet as 'Very healthy' (17.2%) compared to non-users (10.1%). This is a notable achievement given the higher levels of food insecurity among members, suggesting that the food club model supports a more positive perception of diet despite challenging circumstances. (*See the 'Nutritional Resilience and Physical Health' subsection and Table 22 in the Building Resilience report.*)
- **Club membership is linked to higher fruit and vegetable intake.** Active food club users report the highest rates of consuming five or more portions per day (20.7%), exceeding both non-users (19.8%) and, most notably, former members (13.8%). This points to the role of consistent access in shaping healthier eating behaviours. *(See the 'Nutritional Resilience and Physical Health' subsection and Table 23 in the Building Resilience report.)*
- **Existing cooking confidence is enhanced and validated through membership.** Current members are significantly more likely to rate their cooking confidence as 'Very good' (27.0%) than non-users (15.8%). This suggests food clubs both attract and reinforce existing skills, with new foods and peer-to-peer sharing helping to validate and expand members' culinary capabilities. (*See 'The Role of Skill' subsection and Table 24 in the Building Resilience report.*)

3.3 Building Wellbeing and Community Connection

Beyond the immediate benefits of food and finance, the report provides powerful evidence that food clubs repair the harms to wellbeing caused by precarity. They act as vital community hubs, providing an antidote to the isolation of hardship and a powerful, protective buffer against its mental health impacts.

- **Food clubs foster community and reduce isolation.** Members report a profound social impact since joining. A majority report feeling more involved in their community (63.3%), making new friends (53.7%), and feeling less alone (56.2%). (*See the 'An Antidote to Isolation' subsection in the Building Resilience report.*)

- **Membership buffers the impact of hardship on wellbeing.** A majority of users report significant personal improvements, including feeling more confident (61.5%). This is confirmed by modelling, which shows that being a food club member is associated with offsetting a significant portion of the negative psychological impact of being food insecure. (*See 'The Net Positive Impact on Wellbeing' subsection in the Building Resilience report.*)
- **Clubs connect members to wider support**. The analysis shows that food clubs are not just a source of food, but act as a trusted hub for other essential support. They provide a crucial 'more-than-food' function by embedding or making co-present support, such as debt advice, mental health services, and employment courses, which many would not otherwise know about or feel confident accessing. (*See the 'More-Than-Food: A Platform for Wider Support' subsection in the Building Resilience report.*)

  > *'I found out about the Empowering Conversations sessions and the Proper Job courses through the [Food Club], without them I wouldn't have known it existed (…) I was apprehensive at first as I have been struggling with my mental health, and as part of that, meeting new people is very stressful for me. (…) Since the course, I feel more confident. I can go out more and interact with people better; it's helped me and my family, so I'm very happy I attended. I now have the confidence to start looking for part-time work.'*

4. A Comparative Analysis of Food Support: Key Findings

The analysis in confirms that different models of charitable food support are not interchangeable; they are distinct interventions that serve households navigating different forms of hardship. The 'Food Ladders' framework helps to understand these different roles by positioning the services as rungs that people use to find stability. *(See the 'A Comparative Analysis of Food Support Models' section in the Building Resilience report.)*

4.1 Profile of Service users

The research identifies three key pathways of support, each corresponding to a different rung or combination of rungs on the ladder:

- **Food banks are used by households in acute crisis.** Food banks represent Rung 1 of the ladder, providing essential, emergency support. The analysis shows this intervention is primarily used by households in acute crisis, who report the lowest levels of food security among all user groups (37.0% food secure). They often lack the foundational social, financial, and asset-based buffers needed to withstand shocks. *(See Tables 25 and 26 in the Building Resilience report.)*
- **Food clubs help households build resilience against food insecurity.** Affordable food clubs represent Rung 2, a proactive platform for managing hardship. This intervention is used by households navigating chronic precarity, a group with significantly higher food security (73.4%). Compared to those using only food banks, this group is significantly more likely to have the underlying stability afforded by home ownership (228.5% higher odds) or living with a partner (90.3% higher odds). *(See Tables 25 and 26 in the Building Resilience report.)*
- **Combined use reflects a compounded crisis.** Some households use both food banks and food clubs to manage complex pressures like in-work poverty and full-time caring. Compared to food bank-only users, these households are more likely to be working part-time (181.9% higher odds) and have caring responsibilities (90.2% higher odds). They

strategically combine Rung 1 and Rung 2 support to navigate persistent, multifaceted challenges. *(See Table 26 in the Building Resilience report.)*

4.2 The ‘Buffering Effect’: Mitigating the Harms of Food Insecurity

To add further nuance, the report provides a deeper, comparative analysis of health and wellbeing across the different service user groups. This analysis disentangles the role that a household's pre-existing circumstances play in shaping their wellbeing from the specific impact of engaging with support. The findings reveal a complex picture, highlighting both a powerful 'selection effect' and a crucial 'buffering effect'.

- **Underlying stability shapes wellbeing.** Households with stronger pre-existing foundations—such as better housing or finances—are more likely to use food clubs and report higher wellbeing. However, when these background differences are controlled for, the apparent wellbeing advantage largely disappears, confirming a strong 'selection effect'. **(***See the ‘A Deeper Dive’ section and Tables 27 & 28 in the Building Resilience report.*)
- **Food clubs weaken the link between hardship and harm.** Among households not accessing support, food insecurity is strongly associated with feeling unsupported (B = -0.844) and with poorer physical health (B = -0.654). For those engaged with food clubs, this harmful link weakens to the point that it is no longer being statistically significant. (*See Table 29 in the Building Resilience report*.)
- **Community-based support buffers the effects of hardship.** These findings show that food clubs and similar community-based services provide a vital protective buffer against the cascading harms of hardship. While they cannot solve structural precarity alone, they demonstrably reduce its psychological and physical toll, proving their value beyond food provision. (*See the ‘Discussion’ in the ‘A Deeper Dive’ section of the Building Resilience report.*)

5. Leaving the Food Club: A Complex Picture of Success

The report’s final analysis addresses a crucial question: why do members stop using a food club? The findings reveal a complex picture that goes beyond simple success or failure, identifying four distinct ‘journeys’ that former members take. Understanding these journeys provides critical insight into the model’s strengths and areas for improvement. (*See the ‘Push, Pull, and Progression’ section in the Building Resilience report.*)

- **Most members leave because their situation has improved.** A large majority of former members (88.6%) do not go on to use a food bank, and of this group, 78.9% are food secure. Regression analysis confirms that becoming food secure is the strongest predictor of leaving, showing that for most, exiting is a sign of regained stability. (*See Table 25 and ‘The Role of Improved Food Security in the Decision to Leave’ subsection in the Building Resilience report.)*
- **Improved security brings both satisfaction and criticism.** Better circumstances are linked to very different reasons for leaving. Improved food security increases the odds of being in the ‘No Stated Issues’ group by 133%, but also raises the odds of being in the ‘Systemic Dissatisfaction’ group by 71%. This suggests that once acute need has passed, households may feel more able to critique and opt out of services they view as limited or inconvenient. *(See ‘The Role of Improved Food Security in the Decision to Leave’ subsection in the Building Resilience report.)*
- **Some members leave due to unmet needs while still in hardship.** A portion of leavers exit the service despite ongoing need. This group is defined by ‘push’ factors—

often practical or experiential barriers. They are overrepresented in the ‘Systemic Dissatisfaction’ (30.8%), ‘Access Barriers’ (29.0%), and ‘Food Offer Dissatisfaction’ (18.7%) clusters. *(See Table 31 and the ‘The ‘Push’ Factors’ subsection in the Building Resilience report.)*

- **The food offer and logistics are the key reasons for leaving.** For providers seeking to improve retention, the analysis pinpoints specific areas for action. The top-rated reasons for leaving are the choice (mean = 6.57) and type (mean = 6.43) of food available. Access barriers also matter; distance (mean = 6.40) and opening hours (mean = 6.41) are each rated as ‘extremely important’ by around 20% of leavers. *(See Table 30 and ‘The Barriers to Engagement’ subsection in the Building Resilience report.)*

6. Conclusion and Recommendations: A Blueprint for a Resilient Future

This report presents findings from the first large-scale, independent analysis of the affordable food club model in the UK, providing robust evidence that the affordable food club model is a dignified, participatory, and effective Rung 2 intervention for building household resilience. Its foundational finding is that food insecurity in the UK is a state of structural precarity. This ‘architecture of hardship’ is multifaceted, built not only on the 'cracked foundations' of poor household financial resilience but also on the 'shifting ground' of unequal local food environments where physical and economic access to nutritious food is structurally limited. The evidence shows this precarity creates cascading, non-financial harms to a household’s ability to cope.

The evidence proves that the food club model provides a multifaceted response to this precarity. Members report a direct reduction in hardship, improved nutrition, and enhanced wellbeing. The clubs act as vital community hubs that foster social connection and provide a trusted gateway to wider support, fulfilling a crucial ‘more-than-food’ function. This is confirmed by the analysis of a powerful 'buffering effect', which shows that engagement with a food club demonstrably weakens the corrosive link between hardship and poor physical and social wellbeing.

The evidence of a clear 'dose-response relationship'—whereby longer and more frequent engagement is associated with a greater likelihood of becoming food secure—statistically validates this impact. It proves that sustained investment in this community-based infrastructure actively builds the long-term resilience households need.

The analysis also demonstrates that charitable food support is not a monolith; different models are used by households to navigate specific circumstances of hardship: food banks are an essential Rung 1 response for those in acute crisis; food clubs are a proven Rung 2 tool for managing chronic precarity; and a significant group strategically uses both services to navigate a compounded crisis of in-work poverty and caring responsibilities.

Finally, the report reframes what it means to successfully leave support. The finding that improved food security is the single strongest predictor of a member leaving provides the ultimate validation of the model's success. It shows that for many, the journey from a food club is one of progression, where households are ‘pulled’ away by their own restored resilience.

The central recommendation, therefore, is for a strategic policy shift. Prevention requires a robust financial safety net through social security and wages that meet the cost of living. However, for households already navigating the compounding harms of hardship, this analysis shows that financial support alone is not enough. An effective response must combine this safety net with investment in community-based infrastructure like food clubs. Further longitudinal research could provide deeper insight into the long-term trajectories of

households after they leave the service, strengthening the evidence base for this dual-pronged approach.

Key Recommendations for Government

Based on the evidence presented in this report, a comprehensive strategy is needed to both reduce the drivers of precarity while effectively supporting those already experiencing its compounding harms. The following four recommendations outline a clear, evidence-based pathway for policymakers. *(For an expanded set of policy implications and recommendations see 'Policy Implications for Government' in the Building Resilience report.)*

- **Adopt a nuanced approach to financial and holistic support.** Households in prolonged hardship experience compounding social and psychological harms that financial support alone cannot repair.
  Policy ask: Strengthen the financial safety net through adequate social security and wages that meet the cost of living. At the same time, embed clear pathways to trusted, community-based services that rebuild wellbeing and social connection for those already in crisis.
- **Rebalance investment towards prevention and resilience:** The current system is too heavily weighted toward crisis response, which addresses symptoms but not root causes. Preventative Rung 2 models like food clubs demonstrably reduce long-term reliance on emergency services.
  Policy ask: Shift funding from reactive responses to proactive capacity-building interventions. Prioritise sustainable investment in food clubs and support innovative solutions to logistical barriers, such as mobile club pilots and community transport.
- **Develop a national strategy for a more equitable foodscape.** Access to affordable, nutritious food is shaped by structural inequalities—especially in rural, coastal, and post-industrial areas—limiting resilience regardless of income.
  Policy ask: Embed targeted, long-term solutions in the national food strategy. Invest in local food infrastructure and prioritise support for groups most affected, including children and households with caring responsibilities.
- **Recognise food clubs as core public and social infrastructure.** Food clubs reduce hardship, improve wellbeing, and connect people to wider services, yet remain under-recognised in formal policy. Sustaining their impact requires formal integration.
  Policy ask: Recognise food clubs as trusted community hubs by embedding public service outreach within them. Referral pathways (e.g. social prescribing, Jobcentre Plus) and strategic planning (e.g. Joint Strategic Needs Assessments) should be designed to meet people where they are. A cross-departmental approach—led by DHSC, DWP, and DLUHC—is needed to scale and support this essential infrastructure.