

Bridging the Gap

How organic in local shops benefits people and communities



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Front cover photo:

Buying organic veg at Tower Hamlets Food Co-op © Eleanor Church

Contents

Executive summary	4
Introduction.....	6
Role of independent retail.....	7
Insights from the field: Successes and challenges in the organic retail pilots	8
Tower Hamlets Food Co-op.....	10
Cardiff Planet Card.....	12
Edinburgh Community Food	14
Carrick Greengrocers.....	16
Newtownards	18
Liverpool Queen of Greens.....	20
How organic adds value: Measuring social, health/economic and community impact of the retail-based pilots.....	22
What’s holding organic back: Key barriers to access for all in a retail context.....	26
Expanding access to organic: Evaluating voucher schemes for low-income communities	29
Recommendations for retailers and food access projects	33
Recommendations for policy makers and advocates	34
Next steps for Bridging the Gap in retail settings	36
Endnotes	37

Executive summary

This report shares the experiences of six co-designed pilot projects across the UK that aimed to bridge the gap between climate and nature friendly food and people experiencing low incomes. All six pilots continue to offer organic fruit and veg in their communities after the end of the project with a range of approaches to enabling access for people on lower incomes.

Drawing on action research, data, observation and economic modelling, it sets out the programme's key learning: that increasing access to climate and nature friendly fruit and veg offers multiple benefits to people, communities, local economies and the environment.

Based on these findings the report makes recommendations for policy and practice to support long-term access to fruit and veg grown to organic principles across the UK. In particular, it highlights approaches to rolling out a voucher scheme for low-income households to enable access to climate and nature friendly fruit and veg.

Key benefits

The Bridging the Gap programme identified key benefits to increasing access to climate and nature friendly fruit and veg, based on the findings of the six pilots that collectively reached over 2,740 households. These included:

- **Individual:** people report better health and wellbeing, greater dignity and agency in their food choices, and access to higher-quality produce that can also reduce waste.
- **Social:** community retail spaces strengthen social connections and deepen people's connection to where their food comes from.
- **Local economy:** money spent on food circulates locally, supporting jobs, businesses and communities.
- **Environmental:** lower chemical inputs reduce biodiversity loss and increase carbon storage in soils.



Key barriers

The programme also explored the following barriers, to find out more specifically how they applied to households through the pilots, finding

- **Affordability:** our pilots found that locally sourced organic fruit and veg generally costs 40–50% more than non-organic produce in the places where people usually shop. However, this varies significantly across products and across seasons.
- **Availability:** the UK remains highly reliant on imports and lacks a consistent year-round supply of the fruit and veg people most want to eat.
- **Accessibility:** local supply chains are often too weak to distribute organic fruit and veg effectively, and too few retailers offer it close to where people live.
- **Awareness:** even where the offer exists, people may not know about it because it falls outside their usual routines and independent retailers often lack the budget to market it effectively.

Key recommendations

The report concludes with recommendations for retailers and community food projects on how to run schemes like these pilots to improve the accessibility, affordability, awareness and availability of organic fruit and veg for people on low incomes. This includes engaging with suppliers and voucher schemes through other service providers and clearly promoting what you can offer.

It also recommends policy interventions to increase the supply and accessibility of fruit and veg, and to address the 'missing middle' that would make locally produced organic fruit and veg more available closer to where it is grown.



Introduction

Agriculture is projected to become the UK's second-highest greenhouse gas emitting sector by 2040, while global nature loss nears a catastrophic tipping point. Current food production is depleting soils and destroying habitats essential to future farming. The UK's [Climate Change Committee](#)¹ and the international [EAT Lancet Commission](#) have warned that climate and nature recovery targets are out of reach without significant shifts in UK diets, including reducing meat consumption, and doubling the portions of pulses and veg we eat.

The UK's reliance on imported food and fertilisers increases exposure to price volatility and supply chain shocks, many of them climate-related. Reliance on imports also prevents local communities from accruing the economic benefits of producing closer to home. Where money spent locally would contribute to job security and creation.

To strengthen resilience and cut environmental harm, 'good food' must become mainstream and accessible to all. Good food is nutritious, rich in fruit, veg, pulses and wholegrains, lower in inputs and emissions, restores nature, and supports decent livelihoods. Organic farming, alongside other shifts including lower livestock production, must become mainstream, and good food must be affordable in local shops, markets and other retail spaces.

Yet as household food insecurity rises, damaging health and reinforcing disadvantage, people in the UK, especially those on low incomes, eat far less fruit and veg than recommended. Shifting to fresh healthy food that is also grown in a nature friendly way provides an additional challenge in the current system as this often has a higher price and is sold as a premium product, rather than one that everyone should have access to.

The Bridging the Gap programme co-developed and evaluated nine UK pilot projects to test how best to connect low-income communities with organic fruit and veg. Six retail-based pilots across all four nations explored different independent retail models and ways to reduce costs for customers. The programme was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and led by Alexandra Rose Charity, Food Sense Wales, Growing Communities, Nourish NI, Nourish Scotland, and coordinated by Sustain.

The pilots show that investing in supply chains and affordability can help more people on low incomes buy and eat organic produce. This can grow the market, support more climate and nature-friendly farming, and enable dignified choices that improve health and wellbeing.

The report ends with recommendations for a large-scale, multi-year voucher trial to improve access to climate- and nature-friendly fruit and vegetables across the UK.

The state of play

- The UK only produces 35% of the fruit and veg consumed²
- Fruit and veg consumption must double to reach health and planetary goals³
- 14 million people live in relative low income (21% / 1 in 5) (30% of children)⁴
- Supermarkets, which sell organic at high premiums, control 96% of British grocery sales⁵

Potential return on investment in climate and nature friendly food

Every £1 of public money invested returns £8.78 in social, health, economic and environmental benefits.

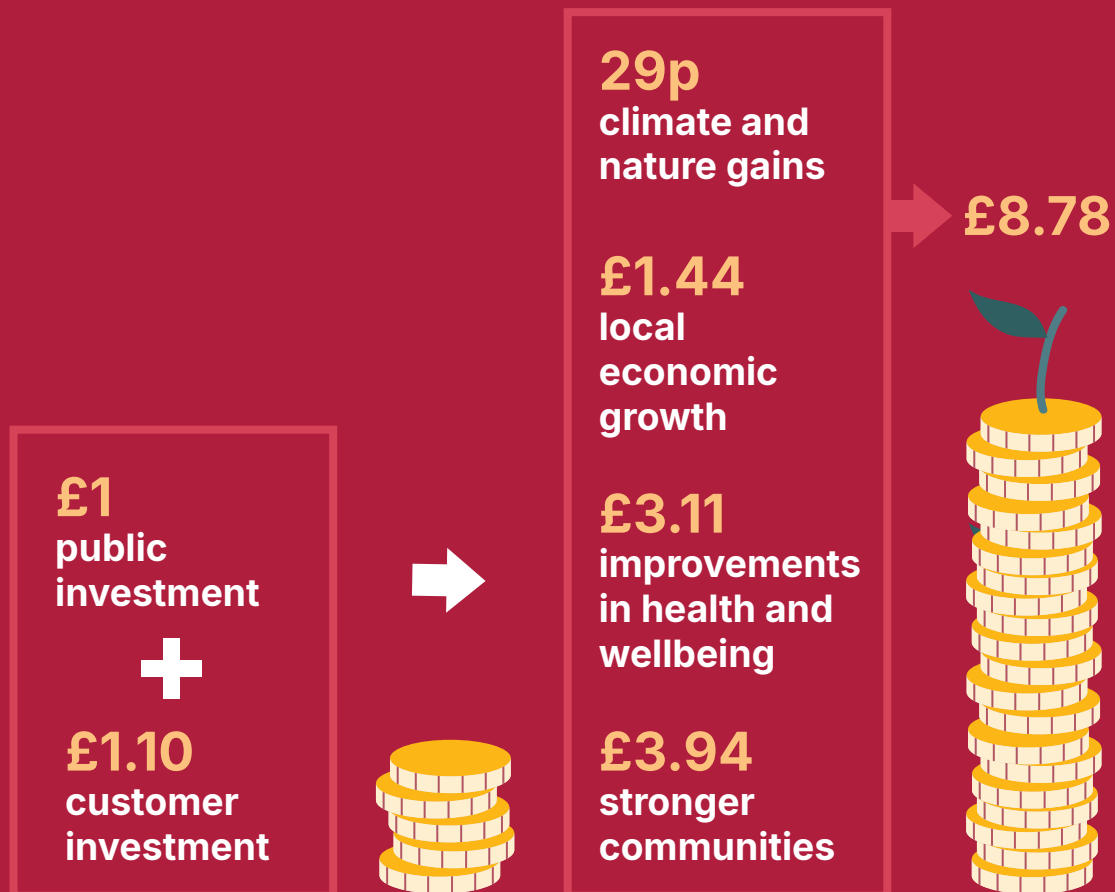


Figure 1.

Role of independent retail

Non-organic, mainstream food systems rely on long supply chains that are shareholder owned, with many middle actors. This extracts profits from farmers, often leaving smaller farms out of pocket, as shown in Sustain's report *Unpicking Food Prices*.⁶ Conversely Sustain's *Local Food Growth Plan*⁷, shows that local independent retailers and organic distributors keep money circulating in local economies, building community wealth. A New Economics

Foundation report indicated that every £10 spent through Bridging the Gap partner, Growing Communities, can generate approximately £25 in local economic activity, compared to just £2.40 from supermarkets.⁸

Sustain has found strong evidence that food supply chains built around smaller businesses, closer relationships and more varied routes to market were more flexible and resilient than incumbent systems during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may help explain the 111% surge in demand experienced by local food suppliers during that time.⁹

Insights from the field: Successes and challenges in the organic retail pilots

Bridging the Gap partners across all four nations set out to understand the impact of making organic fruit and veg accessible to people living in low incomes areas across the UK. Bridging the Gap evaluated the impact of making organic or agroecological fruit and vegetables accessible to people experiencing low incomes.

The findings presented are the product of focus groups, interviews, observation and participant surveys, and quantitative data on production, consumption, and economic outcomes. This mixed-methods approach – which engaged local communities, farmers, and food system actors – ensures that the conclusions reflect both lived experiences and measurable impacts.

Over the six pilots a total of over 6,000 people were reached, with organic fruit and veg which otherwise they would not have had access to. This also supported around one hundred farmers and community projects.

Pricing

Bridging the Gap pilots conducted spot research on the price people would usually pay for non-organic fruit and vegetables in their area and applied a discount to the organic price by the equivalent percentage. This was generally 40-50%.



6 pilots in retail settings:

2,740 households that identified as low income bought organic veg through the pilots, that's over 6,000 people eating organic fruit and veg at home.



Tower Hamlets Food Co-op

Approach	45% discount on organic produce
Number of households that participated	60+ households each week
When did the pilot take place	November 2023-March 2026

In 2023 Alexandra Rose Charity, in partnership with the Wen and Leaders in Community launched the organic food co-op pilot in Tower Hamlets, East London, one of the country's most deprived places. In year one, two food co-ops (Limehouse Town Hall and Teviot Centre) swapped their non-organic produce to organic fruit and veg supplied by Better Food Shed. There was no extra cost to customers, so the organic fruit and veg was sold with a 45% discount. Families enrolled on Alexandra Rose Charity's

Rose Vouchers for Early Years and Fruit and Veg on Prescription projects in Tower Hamlets could also spend their vouchers. Rose Vouchers are provided to families meeting NHS Healthy Start eligibility.

In year two the pilot focused on the Teviot Centre, increasing the number of operating days and with it the number of customers which have continued to grow steadily throughout the pilot.



Buying veg at the Tower Hamlets Food Co-op © Eleanor Church

Pilot wins

Increased access to organic fruit and veg for low-income residents

We estimate from responses to our surveys that most participants were low-income households. At the start of the pilot, 20% of residents surveyed regularly ate organic fruit and veg, by the end of the pilot, this increased to 90%. Working with Folx Farm provided a wide variety of culturally familiar vegetables specifically for the Bangladeshi communities supported by the project.

Changes in shopping habits

Survey respondents switched from shopping for produce at supermarkets to the co-op, facilitated by trust in the produce, financial support and expanded co-op opening hours, which improved accessibility.

Improved nutrition and wellbeing

Almost all residents surveyed reported having a better diet and most felt happier, less lonely and better in themselves.

Sense of agency

Around 90% of respondents surveyed reported increased agency, meaning they had more choice in what they ate and that they could choose food that was good for their health.

Sense of community

According to surveys pilot improved residents' connection to their community and led to wider participation in the community beyond the pilot. It also increased residents' food literacy, providing an informal learning environment about seasonality and unfamiliar fruit and veg.

Supporting local growers

25 farmers benefited from the simple logistics and regular sales opportunity at the co-op where they received approximately 84% of the money generated through sales and witnessed their produce benefiting underserved communities.

Pilot challenges

Community engagement and education

Due to capacity limitations, the pilot only ran limited engagement activities. Where they invested time in this it proved fruitful suggesting that there would have been even greater success in building residents' motivation to buy organic and increased the recruitment of participants.

Labour costs

The retail model of the food co-ops meant that staff costs had to be covered through separate funding and so it was not feasible to cover the operational costs of running the pilot in the price of the food.

Cardiff Planet Card

Approach	Voucher (£11/week)
Number of households that participated	120 households
When did the pilot take place	March 2024 – November 2025

In Wales, people in lower-income households eat less fruit and veg than those in higher-income households.¹⁰ Through Bridging the Gap, Food Cardiff (the city's Local Food Partnership) brought together residents, growers, market stallholders and dietitians to co-design solutions to bridge this gap. The Planet Card gave low-income

households a weekly £11 credit on a digital card to spend on organic fruit and veg at two farmers markets in Cardiff. Members of the scheme could track their spending on an online platform and buy from three growers. The scheme was coordinated locally by Food Cardiff and Cardiff Farmers Markets.



Farmer Paul preparing his organic veg at Cardiff Farmers Market for Planet Card members © Eleanor Church

Pilot wins

Improved nutrition and wellbeing

Access to tasty, fresh, seasonal produce incentivised members to cook more from scratch, try new fruits and vegetables and recipes and eat less processed foods. Planet Card members reported consuming an extra half a portion of fruit and veg, reaching over their 5-a-day goal. Surveys of members found that visiting the markets also made them happier and less lonely.

Sense of community

Members interacted with other customers and growers, chatting and exchanging cooking tips and advice on unfamiliar vegetables. Over time, with regular market visits, these interactions fostered a sense of community belonging.

Increased food literacy

Speaking directly to growers provided learning opportunities for members about organic food production and how to cook unfamiliar vegetables. Surveys tell us that this built their food confidence and trust in growers and provided the grower-consumer connection that's absent in supermarkets.

Sense of agency

Planet Card gave members a sense of agency, providing access to organic fruit and veg and the local farmers market and empowering them to make informed purchases.

Political recognition

Cardiff Planet Card has received significant interest from the government, local food partnerships, local public health teams and the media. The Future Generations Commissioner (who oversees implementation of the Welsh Future Generations Act 2015), has publicly called for similar programmes to be expanded across Wales in their Future Generations Report 2025.

Pilot challenges

Practical barriers

Fitting visits to the markets around work, caring responsibilities and other commitments was challenging for members because of limited market opening hours, travel distance and poor weather. In terms of sustaining the engagement, a longitudinal study of Planet Card members showed participants have struggled to afford the veg at the market and are less motivated to go out in all weather. As a result, they have dropped their consumption of portions of fruit and veg as well as the variety.

Limited supply

Low levels of horticulture and organic production in Wales limited the amount of produce available from local suppliers.

Edinburgh Community Food

Approach	42% discount on organic produce
Number of households that participated	2,040 households
When did the pilot take place	June 2024 – December 2025

This pilot began as a fortnightly pop-up stall in a busy part of Leith in Edinburgh which provided people with access to local and organic fruit and vegetables at a 42% discount. Since then, it has evolved into a weekly stall and has increased the

range it is able to offer which increased the weekly footfall. It also runs box deliveries, supporting people with mobility, caring or other access barriers.



Organic veg stall on Leith Walk, Edinburgh © Eleanor Church

Pilot wins

Increased food literacy

Friendly and knowledgeable staff were able to support people visiting the stall with confidence and making choices.

Increased accessibility

The project increased accessibility by increasing trading days and formats, as well as offering box schemes and delivery models and providing transportation for dedicated group visits. Additional engagement activities in the community, such as seasonal promotions and themed events made a difference too. The stall also increasingly became a community space which was appreciated for social reasons beyond the retail offer.

Increased access to organic fruit and veg for low-income residents

The subsidy model made it easier for people experiencing lower incomes to be able to afford the produce, but even then, it was important to also have other wrap-around support for people accessing the food.

Pilot challenges

Limited awareness

With limited capacity for marketing it was difficult to spread the word about the offer. Edinburgh Community Food found that people experiencing low incomes were more likely to engage through community referrals than to pass by and walk in.

Seasonal and supply constraints

The pilot struggled with supply of organic produce and variety across the seasons. As a result they needed to source from further afield through much of the year to retain the diversity of produce on offer.

Limited affordability

Surveying members found that price remains a concern with regards to organic produce even where the discount was in place.

Carrick Greengrocers

Approach	Membership model enabling a 50% discount on agroecological produce
Number of households that participated	90 households
When did the pilot take place	July 2024 – December 2025

In July 2023 Carrick Greengrocers open its doors as the first community owned Greengrocer in Northern Ireland, having raised over £34,000 through a community share offer. One year later, with support from

Bridging the Gap, it launched its Friendly Food Club offering people experiencing a low income a 50% discount on organically produced fruit and veg.



Filling up on veg at Carrick Greengrocers © Eleanor Church

Pilot wins

Sense of community

It was clear from focus groups and surveys that participants were keen to support local producers and spend their money locally. They also appreciated having a local shop where they can catch up and connect with people. For some it was within easy access of their homes which also meant they passed by regularly. The Friendly Food Club brought in customers who would not otherwise have felt able to engage in this space.

Increased food literacy

Members found that they could discover new produce through the greengrocer and therefore try new recipes. This also afforded them the opportunity to engage their children in where food comes from and on seasonal production.

Quality, taste and health

Members commented in surveys and focus groups that the quality and taste was better than supermarket fruit and vegetables. They also perceived it as healthier which encouraged better eating habits.

Low waste

Members appreciated being able to buy smaller quantities of what they needed as this allowed them to reduce waste.

Pilot challenges

Decline of the high street

The Greengrocer found that as shops closed on the street, including crucially a café opposite, so the footfall reduced. This decline in the high street is common across the UK and is impacting small businesses. Similarly, people said that the shop wasn't central enough and that it was hard to go out of their way to get there when their grocery habits revolve around the supermarket.

Limited awareness

Word of mouth was not strong in Carrickfergus and so without a more significant marketing budget, it was difficult to spread the word about the Friendly Food Club. There was also a perception that the greengrocer itself was expensive, even where this was not accurate.

Different type of shopping experience

People were unused to seeing prices per kg and so found pricing unclear. And while people liked the friendly warmth of the space, focus group participants shared that they were also fearful of being observed or identified as low-income.

Newtownards

Approach	50% discount on veg box scheme
Number of households that participated	31 households
When did the pilot take place	July – December 2024

Farmer, Barry Ferguson, whose family have farmed in the same place since the 1880s, is gradually converting his father's family farm to organic. In 2023 he launched a CSA and veg box scheme, but Barry was conscious that his veg boxes were primarily reaching people on higher incomes and not people living on the estate which borders the farm.

From July 2024, people experiencing low incomes in Newtownards could become members of the weekly vegbox scheme at a 50% discount on the standard price. Members received a share of the farm's produce based on what is ready for harvest that week. The scheme reached 98 people across 31 households, running across 29 weeks (one season).



Members of Newtownards CSA and accessible vegbox scheme © Eleanor Church

Pilot wins

Growing an agroecological business for everyone

This pilot was a great example of a business growing with and for its customers. Barry has brought on new customers at the same time as he has been converting his farm to organic and through the discount made sure that those customers were more broadly representative of the local community.

Sense of community

As the farm is a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), people were able to visit and get involved in the work of the farm, this brought them even closer to where the food was coming from. There was also feedback from some participants who felt that it was beneficial to their mental health as well as their physical health. Volunteers on the farm felt personally invested in its success and proud to be part of it.

Increased access to organic fruit and veg for low-income residents

Without the pilot people found it hard to access organic food locally, so this opened up an option to them that they felt was better for them and their household.

Pilot challenges

Supply limitations

The pilot started in the CSA's second year of operations and so produce was still fairly limited by the constraints of the one producer. The season was challenging in some respects meaning that there was less produce than anticipated and it needed to end earlier than planned.

Limitations of the box scheme approach

Participants at times had trouble getting through their full box or found there were ingredients that didn't appeal to them or to others in their households.

Liverpool Queen of Greens

Approach	45-50% discount on organic produce
Number of households that participated	400+ households
When did the pilot take place	October 2024 – March 2026

The Queen of Greens is a bus that has been transformed into a mobile greengrocer to bring affordable fruit and veg to communities around areas of Liverpool and Knowsley that are underserved for fresh fruit and vegetables. Stopping at 40 locations, the bus serves over 700 people a week many of whom would like to buy organic but can't afford it. Bridging the Gap

worked with Manchester based wholesaler, Organic North, to introduce organic fruit and veg onto the bus at the same price as non-organic. The bus also accepts Alexandra Rose and Healthy Start vouchers.



Queen of Greens bus advertising organic at one of its regular stops © Eleanor Church

Pilot wins

Health and wellbeing

There was a strong sense of improved health and wellbeing among survey respondents linked to the enjoyment of the organic produce that was introduced, which was reported as better quality than the non-organic produce stocked. The produce available on the bus influenced dietary habits encouraging people to try more and varied food.

Sense of community

The bus itself already provided a place for social interaction and an opportunity to engage their children with the food. The provision of organic has also supported transition to life in Liverpool for some, while others perceived the financial support for organic as an expression of care for those who might be financially struggling, contributing to a wider sense of social and community wellbeing.

Convenience and reliability

The convenience and reliability of the bus service offers was cited as another key benefit by survey and interview respondents, stopping twice a week within walking distance of their home means flexible and convenient access to organic food that fits around childcare responsibilities and nursery visits.

Supporting local growers

As part of a broader increase in demand, the pilot has enabled the supplier, Organic North, to onboard nine new climate and nature friendly growers, expanding its product range. These relationships will continue after the pilot as it the bus continues to stock organic produce.

Pilot challenges

Seasonal and supply constraints

Initially the project sourced most produce from the UK however, over the course of the pilot they increasingly sourced from European farms as popular produce wasn't available from UK farms, particularly between March and June, when UK production falls to its lowest levels every year, known as the 'Hungry Gap'. Many of the ingredients required by the diverse customer base in this area are sourced from the Mediterranean.

Nature of some organic produce

Members reported that the atypical, smaller size of some items was a challenge. UK organic onions and apples tended to be smaller than the ones customers were used to and they bought them less.

Lack of refrigerated storage

The lack of refrigerated storage prevented the bus from stocking more perishable (and mostly UK) produce such as lettuces, greens, soft herbs and soft fruits, which would be popular with the customers.

How organic adds value: Measuring social, health, economic and community impact of the retail-based pilots

It is clear from the pilot testimonies that communities value organic, but how can we actively measure the impact of organic and its return on investment? Bridging the Gap set out to do this by exploring the impact against the four factors using modelling, undertaken by the University of Portsmouth and Organic Research Centre. As outlined in the return on investment in figure 1 on page 7, these interventions achieve multiple levels of impact:

- Impact on the individual
- Impact on the environment
- Impact on producers and the local economy, and
- Impact on wider society

The evidence is clear that supporting a transition to a healthy, sustainable food system delivers long-term social, economic and environmental benefits, as well as savings to people and to the public purse. Notably, the most significant impact is on wider community, followed by the individual impact in terms of health and wellbeing. This suggests that organic added the greatest measurable value in our pilots in terms of social and health terms. Importantly, though, any intervention in this space is unique in its ability to deliver value across all areas.

How it makes people feel

Our qualitative surveys and observations, supported by polling data, help us to better understand the motivations for buying organic, and these can be seen across chemical use, health and wellbeing, cultural preference and quality.

Sense of health and wellbeing

The most significant shift for participants reported through the surveys across all pilots was in their sense of wellbeing, with 80% reporting improvements over the course of the pilots. People also reported positive change to their diets, eating fewer snacks and using more vegetables in their cooking, as well as introducing a greater variety and new foods on a more regular basis. As food literacy increased this also led to an increase in cooking from scratch.

Data from surveys of Bridging the Gap participants, corroborated by polling of 2,000 households¹¹, found that the primary reason for choosing organic is that it is free from harmful chemicals. The data demonstrates that people feel healthier and better in themselves when they can choose to eat chemical-free fruit and vegetables.

Polling also found that 'enthusiasm' for buying organic is often highest among lower income groups, particularly when they have children. Most pilots were frequented by families with young children who were making this choice for their children's health.

Cultural preference

Pilots were mainly located in culturally diverse areas, which has a significant influence over the demand for certain foods in those areas. For example, Tower Hamlets has the highest proportion of people who identify as Bangladeshi in the UK at 34.6%, reflected in the customer base at the food co-ops. These customers expressed a strong preference for organic due to narratives around pesticide use in Bangladesh.¹² In the final survey of 47 individual customers conducted by Queen of Greens in April 2026, eating organic was considered particularly important among some ethnic groups, with all Asian respondents (100%) and a large majority of Black African respondents (83%) rating it as either *extremely* or *very important*. These responses highlight the value to accessing organic for these communities.

“Organic is important because its more healthy and it’s what we’re used to having back in Bangladesh [...] In Bangladesh we produce everything, we grow everything organic and fresh. I have grown up eating organic food, so I want to give my baby organic food so that she can grow well.”

Regular user of the Queen of Greens

Appreciation of quality and low waste

Participants reported valuing the freshness, quality and taste of the produce and appreciated being able to prioritise quality and flavour when cost was no longer a concern. They reported it was notable that the produce stayed fresh for longer, meaning lower waste, and less packaging.

“I collect Rose Vouchers at Chrisp Street Children Centre but I spend them at the Teviot Centre and not at Chrisp Street Market. I think at the market the produce is stored for a long time and it’s not organic, but at the Teviot stall the produce is fresh. Organic is more healthy and I like the taste. It’s so much fresher.”

Suad, regular user of the Tower Hamlets food co-op

What it does for community

Bridging the Gap's local retail pilots enhanced connections between farmers, local shops and the wider community, giving people a sense of shared local endeavour, resulting in stronger sense of community and pride. People appreciated the growers and their proximity to the provenance of their food, as well as the ability to spend money to benefit people locally. That sense of belonging has potential to increase uptake and reinforce the value of local sustainable food.

The closer connection with people growing and selling food grown locally also increased food literacy among participants. People in Cardiff reported that they benefit from knowing and speaking to the farmer, Paul, who runs his stall every weekend at the Farmers Market. This interaction has helped them to learn about how to prepare the vegetables, in particular seasonal varieties that they are less familiar with, such as celeriac.

“We have eaten considerably more vegetables and a much greater range of vegetables”, and that they have “enjoyed know where our food comes from”.

Participants in the Newtownards accessible vegbox scheme

How it leads to local economic growth

Through short supply chains the pilots were linked closely to small and medium size retailers and growers, meaning that more money was circulated in local economies. Also those growing the food got a fair return for their produce via the new route to market these pilots presented. The shortened value-

based supply chains meant that money went to local businesses, rather than lost to multiple actors along global supply chains. Farmer Paul on our Planet Card pilot saw a 10% increase in income from market sales with the involvement of the Planet Card customers which he could then spend locally.

“I have a lot more respect for organic farmers now... having spoken to Paul so much. I think with supermarkets, there's a massive disconnect from food. At the market, you get a lot more familiar with what actually goes into creating the food on your table... you're able to talk with farmers each week and listening to their stories... it makes me feel more appreciative of the food, of like, where it comes from, the people who grow it and kind of a closeness to your community you don't get with supermarkets”

Cardiff Planet card user

Scaling interventions linking lower income communities to organic and agroecological growers has the potential to widen this economic impact of the programme as our modelling research has shown (see page number 31). This is supported by wider evidence. For example, the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD), evidence shows that a shift towards using available agricultural land in the UK to produce fruit and vegetables would result in significant growth and deliver £421 million in annual value and create 20,000 jobs.¹³ If this shift was focused on localised and farmer focused supply chains, with good jobs with a living wage, this benefit could be further felt in local economies (see Sustain briefing¹⁴).

How it supports the environment

As pilot participants identified, organic certification prohibits the use of harmful chemical inputs. This not only has potential health benefits but also lowers the risk of environmental pollution in soils and supports natural pest predators and pollinators to thrive, leading to a 30% improvement in biodiversity.¹⁵

Greenhouse gas emissions also reduce as nitrogen fertiliser production and application accounts for 52% of agricultural energy consumption for crops like wheat.¹⁶ Organically farmed soils also store up to 30% more carbon compared to industrially farmed soils. Growing the demand for organic will result in a higher proportion of our domestic fruit and veg being grown to higher climate and nature standards, supporting the transition to agroecology.



Picking organic tomatoes for Edinburgh Community Food © Eleanor Church

What's holding organic back: Key barriers to access for all in a retail context

Using the experience of these pilots and wider exploration of the retail sector, we have synthesised our learning into the following challenges to increasing access to climate and nature friendly produce in retail settings that serve lower income communities.

Reliance on imports and insufficient supply

The UK is heavily dependent on imports of fruit and veg, with over 80% of the fruit we consume and almost 50% of the veg coming from overseas which reduces resilience in our supply chains and exposes us to risk. These risks include extreme weather, inflation and the impact international conflicts on supply chains. The IGD warns that climate change will lead to significant costs for the UK if 'business as usual' continues. The largest import-related cost risk comes from Spain, a key fruit and veg sourcing region, with a predicted increase in costs of 15%.

Low levels of UK production for organic and non-organic produce alike, are compounded by seasonal constraints, which reduce supply over winter and limit what is available at different times of year. Some communities rely on staple foods not traditionally grown in the UK and, although many culturally relevant crops can be grown here, they remain less widely available.

This limited supply was seen in the retail pilots, which varied in approach, where some had a single supplier, others had multiple local suppliers. Three pilots also sourced veg internationally and one pilot blended their organic offer with non-organic. Unsurprisingly, the most vulnerable pilot was the single grower veg box scheme run from

a small Community Supported Agriculture Scheme, which was therefore restricted to a limited period of delivery from June to November. The others were able to mix supply to create a more consistent offer to customers.

Key learning: increasing domestic production and reliance on multiple sources, rather than one grower is required to increase access to organic fruit and veg in a consistent way that meets demand for variety and all year supply.



"I'm disabled for more than six years, so it's normal for me to have difficulties to go out of the house [...]. But now, the only place I go is every Sunday to farmer market [...]. Sundays became very happy days for me."

Bina, Planet Card member

Full cost implications

We know that when buying organic produce, many of the costs that are externalized in conventional farming, such as biodiversity loss and environmental damage are minimised in the organic method of farming.

Studies also show that the perceived cost of organic is often higher than the actual price difference compared with non-organic and that the way it has been marketed makes it feel to some as though it is not for everyone.¹⁷ Our pilots found that the prices of seasonal UK grown veg fluctuate and that at some points in the year specific lines

of UK organic veg are comparable in price. Nonetheless, price is undoubtedly a barrier to access. The pilots overcame this challenge through matching costs alongside project support such as covering management costs.



“My sales pitch for this place is nothing to do with organic or cooperative. It’s, go in and buy the stuff and taste it. And I guarantee that’s ... most people have come back and said, I went down and I bought beetroot or whatever and it’s like, I didn’t know fruit and veg could taste like that.”

**Member of the Carrick
Greengrocer’s Friendly Food Cub**

For participants across all Bridging the Gap pilots the most significant consideration when buying food was consistently the price; while this was factored into the design of the pilots there was still a perception of price, and also a limit to the sustainability once the vouchers had ended. Our 2024 polling¹⁸ confirmed that for all income groups cost is the main barrier to buying organic produce, particularly people experiencing a low income despite wanting to.

Key learning: Investment at supply and demand ends of the supply chain would be required to overcome price barriers to make nature and climate friendly food consistently and accessibly priced.

Cultural and dietary preference

The range of fruit and vegetables on sale could be a barrier. Tower Hamlets Food Co-op partnered with Folx Farm to provide culturally relevant vegetables. Other pilots

offered non-organic culturally relevant foods if an organic version was not available to ensure that customers were still attracted to their retail offer. There was a particular reliance on tropical fruit.

Key learning: More work is required to understand seasonal eating in the UK, and encourage people to think about the impact of year-round availability of imported fruit and vegetables as well as look at other solutions such as increasing domestic production.

Missing local infrastructure

Across the food system, supply chains have become consolidated and dominated by large food companies and retailers. This has driven prices of non-organic fruit and veg in supermarkets down to the extent that farmers can receive less than 1% of the profit from their produce.

In turn this has left a gap for local infrastructure. Slowly we are seeing this gap being filled with businesses such as collaborators on this programme the Better Food Shed and Organic North, which source and supply local and organic produce. However, these small businesses would need to scale in order to be able to deliver to the schedules retail businesses require, and some retail pilots struggled with the restricted delivery times and days.

Similarly for retail spaces the competitive environment in which independent retail operates, against the backdrop of supermarket dominance, means that remaining competitive, when costs such as rent remain high, is challenging.

Key learning: Investment in infrastructure remains key to scaling small interventions and finding some efficiency in the supply chain, to meet growing demand.

Lack of awareness and established shopping habits

Smaller independent retailers, such as those in these pilots, do not generally have a significant marketing budget available to them. As people have become accustomed to convenience store and supermarket shopping it can be difficult for retailers to reach their target audience.



"Shopping here has improved the quality of my life both mentally and physically. It's a real pleasure visiting each week and I would miss it dreadfully if it was no longer functioning."

Regular visitor to Edinburgh Community Food's veg stall

Additionally, access to most of the pilots was restricted to market days and veg box drop off days, and these were generally not in locations where people did their main weekly shop. This is reflective of many organic retail outlets, often farmer's markets, farm shops and veg box schemes. While this is seen as limiting and requires a change to habits, the pilots with these restrictions found that they retained their customers over the course of the pilot, with many building new routines around it due to the commitment of participants to access the food available at affordable prices.

Key learning: Smaller social, community and independent retail needs support to invest in marketing and incentives to attract a broader base, including increasing the convenience, while exploring how shoppers could be encouraged to adapt to new shopping habits that provide other social and community benefits, such as attending weekly markets.



Paul setting up the veg stall at Cardiff Farmers Market © Eleanor Church

Expanding access to organic: Evaluating voucher schemes for low-income communities

Context on vouchers

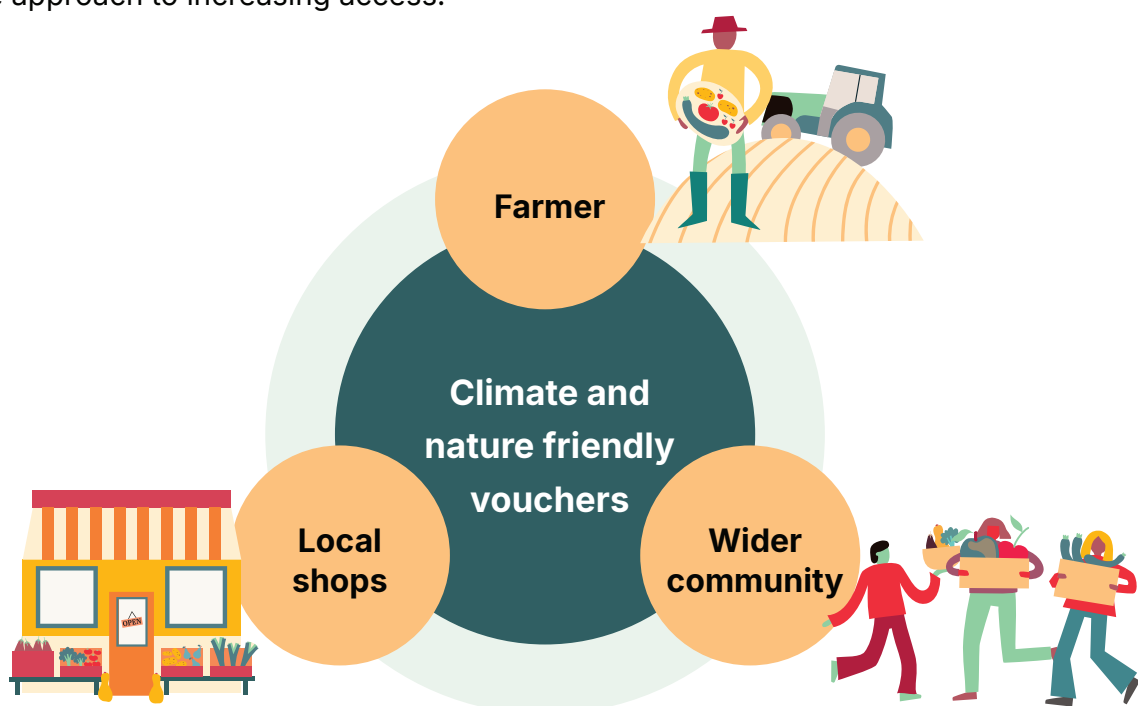
There is consensus amongst anti-poverty organisations that food poverty is driven by lack of income as opposed to lack of food, although this can also be compounded by lack of access and a poverty premium where local stores are more expensive. There is also evidence that cash-first interventions to household food insecurity offer more dignity and choice than emergency food parcels.¹⁹

Whilst vouchers themselves are not strictly a cash-first intervention, they are a step away from stop-gap solutions and offer people choice in how they spend the additional finance available to them and dignity if they are offered in an appropriate way.²⁰ Alexandra Rose Charity has also found that vouchers can significantly reduce stress and anxiety, thereby easing the mental load on users.²¹ Three of the six pilots engaged with vouchers, which were found to offer the simplest and most traceable approach to increasing access.

Climate and nature friendly voucher schemes are a unique policy instrument with the potential to increase access to nutritious diets, which would build on an existing approach as used in the Healthy Start / Best Start scheme. They have been used in the US for decades and could drive a vital market for climate and nature friendly British producers and boost the resilience of local retailers and markets, all while improving supply chain fairness. Long term, this helps to achieve multiple policy goals: local economic growth, reduced diet-related diseases, social wellbeing and environmental improvements.

Climate and nature-friendly vouchers/cards can create connections between farmers, local shops and the wider community

These connections give people a sense of belonging, encourage uptake of the scheme and support local, sustainable food.



Voucher scheme options

There are many different types of voucher scheme and so Bridging the Gap commissioned a feasibility study from the Organic Research Centre on a range of climate and nature friendly voucher schemes. Fifty-four UK and international schemes, spanning public health, social security,

food access and environmental policy, were reviewed alongside real data from the Bridging the Gap pilots.

The assessment shortlisted two approaches to a climate and nature friendly voucher scheme as they offer the best balance of equity, feasibility and system impact.

Neighbourhood Community Organic Fruit and Veg Fund	Organic Healthy Start Uplift
<p>Provides support to everyone in high-need communities i.e. a universal approach.</p> <p>£11 weekly vouchers redeemable on organic fruit and veg in local independent retailers.</p> <p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removes stigma and reduces proof-of-need barriers • High participation resulting in increased benefits for economy, climate and nature • Simple administration • Evidence from pilots shows improved food security and dietary diversity <p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High cost at national scale • Requires stable, long-term public funding • Political feasibility can be challenging • Small-area pilots may have a small combined impact 	<p>Provides support to those who are eligible for Healthy Start.</p> <p>The optional uplift of £6.75 is provided on the condition that the entire £11 weekly voucher is redeemed on organic fruit and veg in local independent retailers.</p> <p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directly targets low-income households so health and individual benefits felt by those most in need • Lower cost • Uses existing administrative infrastructure <p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stigma associated with targeted support • Complex administration • Lower participation meaning wider benefits not fully realised • Households on border of eligibility miss out

In addition, the Organic Research Centre researched policy and funding routes for a national climate and nature friendly voucher scheme. They found:

- support from complementary policies shaping food production and access, health and local delivery schemes would be crucial to success

- in terms of funding, costs could be shared across the government departments that would benefit from the scheme including DEFRA, DHSC / NHS and local government/place-based funding which could make this investment more attractive to policy makers.

Potential return on investment in climate and nature friendly voucher schemes

Using economic analysis by Organic Research Centre, a monetary value was placed on these benefits, to compare the potential return on investment in the two preferred climate and nature friendly

voucher schemes at regional and national levels. The costs of digital infrastructure and maintenance, marketing, community engagement and monitoring are apportioned into the case studies.



Maximising the uptake on these programmes would be fundamental to their success and the balance of benefits against the costs. As figure 2 demonstrates, the Neighbourhood Community Organic Fruit and Veg Fund approach shows stronger return on investment with scaling as it is more likely to experience higher levels of uptake, which has been demonstrated in other universal schemes such as free school meals. Our modelling suggests that rolling out this scheme across 13 low income neighbourhoods in the UK could:

- Improve the health and wellbeing of over 9,000 residents
- Increase farmer and grower income by almost £5.5m across 5 years

- Increase in production of organic fruit and veg by around 288 tonnes over 23 hectares of land.

The results of this analysis demonstrate the importance of achieving and maintaining high participation levels for which investment in programme management and marketing as well as digital infrastructure is critical. The analysis also shows that the approach could be picked up and piloted regionally, particularly in areas of the country where there are wider spread levels of deprivation or that have been targeted for levelling up. In these areas there would be a strong case for the universal approach.

Recommendations for retailers and food access projects

Retailers or community food projects looking to develop similar work to that explored by the retail pilots may find the following learnings valuable.

Affordability:

- Ensure you are clearly advertising that you accept Healthy Start.
- Explore partnerships with other voucher schemes such as Alexandra Rose Charity's Rose Vouchers or crowdfund for pay-it-forward schemes.
- Explore partnerships with organic wholesalers who have a focus on short farmer-focused supply chains, but who are also able to source internationally where necessary to plug gaps.

Accessibility:

- Look to source from farms that are growing organic culturally relevant foods and if not supplement organic with non-organic foods that appeal to cultural preferences in the area.
- Support seasonal eating by engaging customers with recommendations on how to cook seasonal produce, such as recipe displays including on veg bags (which proved successful on a number of pilots).

Availability:

- Connect with local suppliers such as those on this pilot to explore how to make delivery options work for your retail space.
- Embrace the need for an appropriate combination of UK and international supply.
- Consider opening times and convenience as well as promoting the wider benefits of your model if hours are limited i.e. what is the social and community offer.

Awareness:

- Where vouchers can be used in retail spaces, engage with local service providers to ensure they refer people to your space for what it can offer.
- Advertise your offer as clearly as possible to customers

Recommendations for policy makers and advocates

The six retail pilots demonstrate what is possible when organic fruit and veg is made accessible to people experiencing low incomes. Below we outline policy recommendations from supply through to access which would help to bridge the gap (for further detail see the full Bridging the Gap Briefing²²).

1. Fix the supply

1.1. Introduce a cross-departmental horticulture growth strategy to increase fruit, vegetable and pulse production and consumption.

- Support collaboration between and with growers.
- Offer grants to new entrants and growers, alongside advice and land access, to increase the number of growers and amount of fruit and veg grown.
- Offer horticulture training to new entrants and the next generation of growers, with a strong focus on organic and agroecological production methods.
- Support growers to introduce culturally relevant food crops.
- Support growers finding good routes to market, particularly direct sales to retain more value, and those that reach lower income communities.

1.2. Integrate the horticulture growth strategy with an organic action plan to ensure that the increase in production minimises environmental damage, increases biodiversity, and plays its role in both meeting and driving increased demand for climate and nature friendly food.

2. Fix the missing middle

2.1. Invest in and support shorter SME supply chains by creating a national or regional investment pot or grants targeting organic and agroecological supply chain SMEs, such as a nature friendly uplift.

- Grants and other forms of investment should prioritise increasing processing and aggregation capacity between farmers or at distribution level, such as washers and splitters.
- Create local and regional planning policies that prioritise space and facilities for food SMEs, including values-led wholesalers and distributors.

2.2. Improve fairness and transparency across mainstream supply chains through legislation, and by strengthening the role of UK supply chain regulators.

- This can be delivered through, for example, enhancing the mechanisms and powers of the Fair Dealing Obligation, Groceries Code Adjudicator and the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator, and learning from good practice set by the Spanish translation of the EU's Unfair Trading Practice directive.²³

2.3. Produce a local food growth plan for each region in conjunction with civil society and the community, including food partnerships, to map out the most effective regional approaches to increasing availability of healthy and sustainable local food that can also boost the local economy within that region or geographical area.

3. Fix the access

3.1. Using existing and new incentive schemes such as vouchers to increase access to organic fruit, veg and pulses in independent retailers.

- Fund further pilots and roll-out in communities to understand the most efficient mechanisms for getting people back onto the high streets to purchase climate and nature friendly fruit and veg. These could further test and trial the approaches modelled in this report:
 - Neighbourhood Community Organic Fruit and Veg Fund
 - Organic Healthy Start Uplift Scheme

3.2. Support the expansion of local and community food retail such as farmers markets, community food hubs, food co-ops and independent greengrocers, to better connect consumers with small-scale producers and with each other.



With veg from Cardiff Farmers Market © Eleanor Church

Next steps for Bridging the Gap in retail settings

All of the retailers who worked on these pilots continue to offer organic fruit and vegetables to their customers. Most of the schemes have continued in some form or another.

- **Newtownards Accessible Veg Box** increased the price of the veg box scheme but still to less than the original full price and this has helped them to retain 28 of the 31 customers from the pilot. The number of households on the scheme have doubled in the two years since the pilot started.
- **Carrick Greengrocers Friendly Food Club** has fundraised from its community shareholders to continue the friendly food club scheme.
- **Tower Hamlets Food Co-op** sourced new funding to continue with the offer at the food co-op and are exploring how to transition to a sustainable model in the long term.
- **Liverpool Queen of Greens** is continuing to source organic through the same supplier, at a slightly lower level without a subsidy.
- **Edinburgh Community Food** is also continuing to offer organic using a four-part payment model: regular, subsidised, emergency provision, and a pay it forward option (where customers can contribute towards emergency provision “pay it forward” boxes). This has led to the majority of customers paying the listed prices, while still allowing flexibility for those who need additional support. They have managed to attract more customers and increase revenue by including cheese and eggs in their offer.
- **Cardiff Planet Card** has closed for the moment to take stock and explore options for follow on approaches in Cardiff and beyond (for more information see Food Cardiff’s Planet Card Report: How public funds can build community wealth by channelling crisis funding through local economies to benefit people and planet²⁴).

These pilots have demonstrated how public interventions can generate significant social return on investment by improving diets, strengthening communities and supporting farming for climate and nature across the UK. Sustain will continue to call for public funds to be channeled to supporting schemes such as those presented here which can support multiple public goods for healthier people, communities and local environments.

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Bridging the Gap

How organic in local shops benefits people and communities

A Sustain publication

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About Sustain

Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the living and working environment, enrich society and culture, and promote equity. It represents around 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local level.

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About Bridging the Gap

Launched in 2022 Bridging the Gap is supported by the National Lottery Community Fund. Sustain, Alexandra Rose Charity and Growing Communities working with Food Sense Wales, and Nourish Scotland are bringing together organisations united in the belief that everyone has the right to healthy and affordable food that works for the planet.

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