



The role of community food retail

October 2018

Introduction

We believe that everyone should be able to afford to feed themselves and their families. In the fifth largest economy in the world this is well within reach, yet in the UK an estimated 8.4 million people struggle to get enough to eat. In response to this pressing need, a variety of organisations have been developing community food retail initiatives in which people at risk of or living in poverty can purchase food at a reduced price or through paid membership. Examples include social supermarkets, food co-operatives, community pantries and fruit and vegetable schemes. These differ from food banks because food is bought rather than given away. Therefore these types of projects typically aim to help prevent people from reaching an emergency situation and/or to get back on their feet after a crisis. Councils, charities, universities, housing associations, social enterprises and others are active in this sector.

In this briefing, we review a variety of community food retail schemes running across the UK, including information on operations, measuring impact and funding, as well as some of the debate around different retail models. The conclusion suggests a number of questions for consideration by current or future projects in their development.

Fruit and vegetable schemes

A variety of projects have been set up to specifically improve access to fresh fruit and vegetables for people who are on a low income. In Barking and Dagenham [Community Food Enterprise](#) operates a mobile fruit and vegetable van, [The Mobile Green Grocer](#), which offers fruit and vegetables at reduced prices to the community every Wednesday at various locations and times across the borough. In Plymouth, Tamar Grow Local's [Grow, Share, Cook](#) supplies low income households with fortnightly fruit and vegetable bags. Households receive five seasonal fruit and vegetables free of charge from local producers and growing community projects. The [Greenwich Corporate Development Agency](#) (GCDA) operates fruit and vegetable wholesale stands outside children and community centres, where items are on sale for at affordable prices and Healthy Start vouchers can be used. In Doncaster, [Bentley Urban Farm](#) runs a fruit and vegetable box scheme that ranges from £30-£80 per month for the majority of customers, which enables them to also offer subsidised boxes to residents on low incomes.



GCDA fruit and vegetable stall in Greenwich

Social supermarkets

Social supermarkets typically redistribute food surplus through a membership scheme which provides a certain amount of food items each visit for a set weekly or monthly fee. Weekly fees range from £2.50-£5, which gives members access to different categories of food up to a value of £15-£25 per week. They are distinct from discount supermarkets as they commonly offer members other support services, such as employment or financial advice, and aim to make a wider social impact, for example improving health and well-being and/or reducing social isolation. Participation in support services may be optional or a required condition of membership, depending on the scheme.



Social supermarkets usually have some membership criteria in order to reach people who are vulnerable to food insecurity, such as

- living within a specific catchment area based on indices of deprivation, postcodes or housing association;
- receiving benefits;
- paying a weekly/yearly membership fee;
- attending on a regular basis and/or being involved in running the scheme; and/or
- participating in a development programme.

For example, [Community Shop](#) members are required to provide proof of address as well as evidence that they are currently receiving income support in order to be eligible for reduced food at one third of typical retail prices. They are also encouraged to take part in a professional development programme but it is not mandatory.

Membership at the [Apex Living Centre](#), run by a housing association in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, costs £5 per week and requires participation in a skill building programmes. Members can obtain £25 worth of food each week, including fresh, frozen and dried goods, fruit and vegetables.

At the [Food Stop Shop](#) in Croydon, London, members pay £3.50 per week and receive £15 worth of food, while also benefitting from training, volunteering opportunities and employment support. The opportunity to sign up for income, employment and housing support is offered upon enrolment to the Food Stop Shop and members are encouraged to engage with these services.

Similarly, when members join [Your Local Pantry](#), set up by Stockport Homes, they are asked if they would like to receive additional advice on finances, housing and debt management and are then referred to the relevant organisation as needed. Members pay £2.50 per week and can choose 10 different types of food items at each visit.

Food co-operatives

Some universities, in particular students' unions, have set up co-operatives or buying groups to improve student and community members' access to healthy food at affordable prices. For example, [The Food Hive](#) at the University of Stirling offers members 10% discount on food purchases, typically stocking grains, pasta, herbs, legumes, tea and coffee. Membership is open to anyone and costs £2.50 per semester. Non-members can also purchase food at regular prices and small organic vegetable boxes are available at discounted bulk prices (£6.50 for 2-4kg of vegetables).

Many groups outside of universities have also set up food co-ops. Their intention is typically to benefit from bulk/wholesale prices, offer an alternative to supermarkets and/or purchase more ethically produced food. While they can offer members food at a price lower than conventional supermarkets, they can also require paying up front and/or buying larger quantities, which can be a barrier to participation for those with low incomes. Sustain has produced a [toolkit on starting a food co-operative](#) and has a map of food co-ops and buying groups in the UK.





Operations

Most of the projects in this briefing are community-led, often with those accessing services also volunteering at social supermarkets, pantries and food co-operatives. Given limited resources and reliance on volunteers, opening times are usually limited, with social supermarkets often open 2-3 times per week within specified hours. Membership capacity may be restricted as well, often due to limited resources and size of spaces being used for food storage.

Food supply

The national charity [FareShare](#) is the main food supplier of social supermarkets and pantries, redistributing surplus food it receives from supermarkets to other community groups for a fee. With 21 regional centres across the UK, they are able to offer a relatively regular and reliable supply of food, although choice of food is limited based on what's available. Many supermarkets and pantries make agreements directly with local supermarkets and food suppliers, whether a part of national chains or otherwise. Some projects link with local food growing sites too. For example, Your Local Pantry partnered with Green Lane allotments to supply fresh fruit and vegetables to their Penny Lane pantry in Stockport. University food co-operatives typically obtain food from wholesalers such as Suma, Green City and Ethical Worker Co-operative.

Funding

Many initiatives rely on outside funding to get started as well as to continue operations. Common funding sources are councils, donations, corporate sponsors, external grants or a combination. In spring 2018 [Feeding Britain](#) was awarded £250,000 from the National Lottery to pilot citizens' supermarkets in Coventry, Birkenhead, Cheshire West and Chester. Stockport Homes employs a full-time project officer to run the four Your Local Pantry sites with a team of volunteers. Church Action on Poverty has received grant funding to help further develop and expand Your Local Pantry as a social franchise across the UK.

Fruit and vegetable schemes also receive funding through grants, corporate partnerships and public donations. Community Food Enterprise uses warehouse space donated by Tate & Lyle and in spring 2017 it was awarded the Food for London grant to fund a volunteer coordinator and the re-organization of food collection and distribution efforts within the community. Tamar Grow Local has received grant funding from Cities of Service UK and Nesta to run their Grow, Share, Cook campaign. In each model reviewed, the economic and social commitments (e.g. volunteering and in-kind support) are fundamental to the scheme thriving within the community.



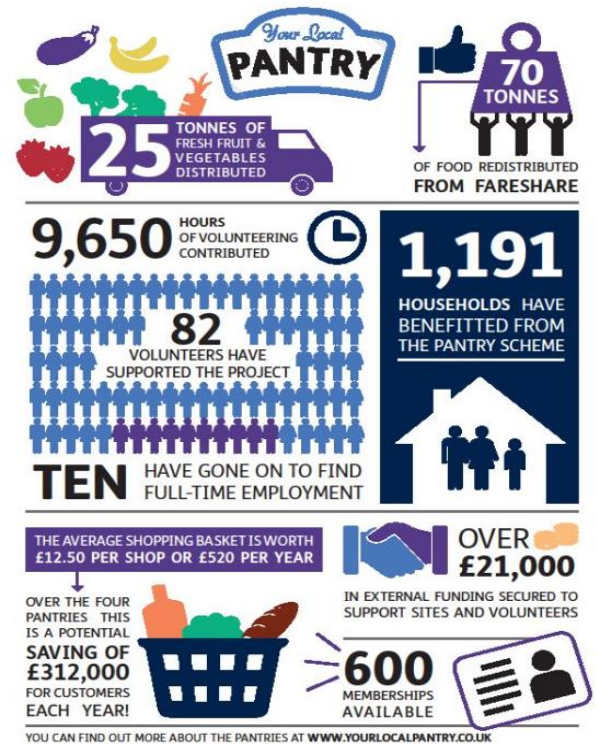


Impact of action

Across such a wide variety of projects, information on the impact to beneficiaries has not been reported in a standardised way. However, Community Shop and Your Local Pantry have released data on the impact of their individual services. Community Shop reports total monthly average household savings of £201 for members and Your Local Pantry highlights the number of households benefitting, volunteers' contributions, the quantity of food distributed and member savings.

Debate about different retail models

Community food retail models outlined in this brief offer an imperfect approach in an imperfect world. Some have been criticised for redistributing food of low nutritional value. Other projects have been criticised for not sufficiently addressing the root causes of food poverty and contributing to the institutionalisation of a 'second class' food system. Any joined-up approach to tackling poverty needs to look at holistic and long-term changes to the food system, as well as the wider low-wage economy.



On the one hand, buying food from a community food project at a reduced cost for a period of time can make a real difference to families experiencing financial difficulties. When living on a very tight budget, it can particularly help improve access to fresh fruit and veg (if/when available) and give parents more flexibility to encourage children to try different foods. However, at the same time, projects that redistribute surplus food may have limited choice in what they receive from distributors, including products that are high in fat, salt and sugar. This is a concern as diet-related disease is more prevalent amongst low income households. As such, some projects are trying different strategies such as offering healthy options at a lower price (e.g. fresh fruit and veg), reducing the prominence of less healthy options (e.g. junk-free checkouts) or other trialling other incentives for healthier choices.

In addition, there are concerns about conflating issues of food surplus and food poverty, and in particular championing the idea that the former can be a solution to the latter. We recognise that we need to radically reduce the amount of food going to waste for pressing ethical and environmental reasons, but not fall into the trap of seeing inherently wasteful business practices as the way to solve hunger. In this context, it's important that projects communicate in a responsible way about the problems they are trying to address and perhaps acknowledge those they are not.

Whilst redistributing food that would otherwise go uneaten is a compassionate response, and reduces the amount of edible food going to waste, we also recognise that food aid in any format will not solve the deep causes of food poverty. Low pay and insufficient welfare support, as well as lack of availability in some areas, leaves people unable to put food on the table to feed their families. Also, using surplus food in place of conventional supply chains could further reinforce a cycle of poverty, with the costs having to be absorbed further along the supply chain, which may in turn contribute to farmers and workers living in poverty themselves. To make food poverty a thing of the past we need food, work and welfare policies that enable people to access healthy food and lead dignified lives.



Conclusions and considerations

People should be able to feed themselves and their families in a dignified way. Any intermediary food provision which assists with this should sit alongside advocating for more sustainable and long-term changes to policies around wages and benefits that reflect the real cost of living and a situation where healthy food is affordable to all. The community retail models covered in this briefing offer approaches that over the shorter term can play a useful role in helping prevent people from falling into (food poverty) crisis, as well as transitioning out of it. The current food system does not make it easy for people on a low income to access an affordable healthy diet and diverse retail models can help mitigate this.

Although their scope in addressing the underlying causes of poverty is variable, there are many ways that projects like these can help maximise the incomes of families in need. The following questions can help guide thinking along these lines for current and future projects.

- How could the project link with related support services that address the root causes of people's difficulties, e.g. fair loans and financing, employment support, benefits advice, etc.?
- Is the project location and food offered accessible to people with a wide variety of physical and mental health needs? Does it take into account the cultural needs of the communities it's working with?
- Is the project able to accept Healthy Start vouchers? If not, can the project signpost to another local retailer who does and encourage eligible people to sign up?
- How could the project increase access to fresh fruit and vegetables? Can the healthiest foods be priced most affordably? Could this be balanced by relatively higher pricing for foods high in fat, sugar and salt?
- How could the project link with local food growing, cooking and other community food projects?
- What role can the project play in improving the wider local food system in the long term?

