

“Community supermarkets
could offer a sustainable
solution to food poverty...”

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Ally Paget
February 2015

Executive summary

Introduction and argument

In 2014 rhetoric about poverty and its causes escalated. One side of the political spectrum speaks of an ongoing ‘cost of living crisis’, and the other of a ‘culture of welfare dependency’ that has become so entrenched that people have lost the will and skill they once had to work, plan and budget to meet their families’ needs. Nonetheless, and whatever the reason, one fact is unavoidable: more people are now struggling to afford the essentials of daily living.

Nowhere is the squeeze on living standards in the UK more visible (nor, for that matter, are the contributing factors more hotly contested) than when it comes to the ‘food bank phenomenon’. According to figures from the UK’s biggest food bank operator, the Trussell Trust, use of food banks increased by 163 per cent between 2012/13 and 2013/14. Statistics like this spurred the creation, in October 2013, of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger and Food Poverty, which published the findings of its year-long inquiry, alongside a set of recommendations to government, in December 2014.¹

As the findings of the APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty show, there are a variety of drivers behind the increase in the use of food banks, and food poverty more generally. Increases in the cost of living, in food prices specifically, wage stagnation and welfare reform all play a part in leading to more families having lower incomes to pay for more expensive food. The government acceptance (or not) of the need for food banks, or the evidential link between cuts to benefits and food bank use, remain highly politicised issues, as too does the (discredited) position that the increased supply of food banks in some way creates demand.

What is clear, however, is that food banks are not – and are not designed to be – a long-term solution to food poverty. The majority operate a referral scheme, with GPs, job centres and other designated agencies able to issue clients with three single-use vouchers per year, each allowing three days of food. The Trussell Trust states that support can be extended in ‘exceptional circumstances’². The official guidance from the Trust reads:

A core feature of our model is the ‘three voucher guideline’ which allows referral agencies to issue up to three foodbank vouchers per crisis to a person without reference to the foodbank. If the client’s crisis has not been resolved within this timeframe, the referral agency must contact the foodbank to explain the situation and discuss the possibility of issuing further vouchers to extend support.

And yet Demos analysis of statistics released by the Trussell Trust suggest that 50–60 per cent of those using food banks are doing so as a result of what might be termed ‘chronic’ food poverty – in other words a long-term inability to afford food because of entrenched poverty.

This estimate is based on data on ‘referral causes’ to Trussell Trust foodbanks, which is published on the Trust’s website. To reach the 50–60 per cent estimate we categorised the primary causes into ‘acute’ and ‘chronic’ as set out in the table below. This excludes the ‘Other’ category (10.5 per cent). If all ‘Other’ primary causes were chronic rather than acute, that would bring the total estimate for chronic up to 62.34 per cent, hence our upper estimate of 60 per cent.

Table 1

‘Acute’	‘Chronic’
Benefit delays 30.93 %	Low income 20.29%
Domestic violence 1.93%	Benefit changes 16.97%
Sickness 1.67%	Debt 7.85%
Delayed wages 1.00%	Unemployed 3.65%
Children’s holiday meals 0.94%	Homeless 3.08%
Refused STBA 0.64%	
Refused crisis loan 0.55%	
= 37.66%	= 51.84%

We recognise that any categorisation of this type has its limitations and involves scope for different interpretation of the data. For example, The Trussell Trust's joint report with Oxfam, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the Church of England, 'Emergency Use Only' (2014), uses the same approach, but categorises the data differently, producing an estimate of 58% in 'acute' need compared to our estimate of 40–50%³. As 'Emergency Use Only' puts it:

Data from the Trussell Trust indicate that across the UK, 58% of food bank referrals are attributed to what might be described as an 'acute' crisis (benefit problems, unemployment, homelessness, sickness, etc); 23% are attributed to 'low income'; a further 7% to 'debt' and 1% to 'child holiday meals'; with the remaining 12% attributed to 'other'.⁴

For families facing chronic food poverty, a referral to a food bank is more likely to be triggered by a 'crunch point' – the slow dwindling of resources until the last tin of soup is used up, or the payday credit is exhausted – rather than an unexpected 'crisis' event such as a benefits sanction or family breakdown. For those in chronic food poverty, nine days' free food a year may be a vital lifeline, but their food bank voucher does not address the problem faced during the remaining 356 days – that incomes are not stretching to afford adequate food to feed the family.

A more sustainable solution to chronic food poverty is sorely needed. The APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty has recommended as much, advocating that the Trussell Trust – which fully supports the recommendation – should lead the development of a 'food bank plus' model, which would address the underlying causes of (what we are terming) chronic food poverty. This report is concerned with what 'food bank plus' might look like. It is important to recognise that this need not be a process of reinventing the wheel: nationally and internationally there is a wealth of models to draw on. Community supermarkets, our focus in this report, are one potential route.

Found more commonly in Europe, Australia and the US, for the purposes of this project we define community supermarkets as organisations with the following features:

- food is *for sale* (not provided for free)
- the food sold is *groceries* as opposed to prepared meals or hot food
- food is sold at *below market prices*
- the model has a *social purpose* of tackling food poverty.

We thereby exclude initiatives selling only non-food items or prepared food (e.g. community cafés), those where food is given away for free (e.g. food banks), and those where food is sold for profit – even on a loss-leading model – without a primary social purpose (e.g. low cost supermarkets Aldi and Lidl).

Methodology

This research sought to explore the current landscape of alternative affordable food provision in the UK, what community supermarkets look like abroad, what they might look like and achieve in the UK, and the factors that might help or hinder their implementation and operation here.

The methodology for this project comprised desk research and qualitative fieldwork, in the form of depth detailed interviews with a range of stakeholders.

Demos carried out a scoping exercise, identifying existing community food initiatives across Europe, the US, Canada and Australia. We looked for any and all food outlets designed to sell food to the public at affordable, below market prices. To do this, we reviewed publicly available information such as accounts, annual reports websites, and other promotional information. We also carried out a literature review of evaluations and commentary on the impact of these and wider affordable food schemes.

In addition, we carried out a number of telephone interviews with managers and/or directors of the schemes identified through the review. Interviews explored the motivations for establishing affordable food projects and the details of their

operating models. Interviewees were asked to supply any relevant unpublished material or statistics relating to their schemes.

This report presents the findings by combining an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative (interview) data. In it, we compare and contrast a range of affordable food operations, as well as the ideological motivations behind their inception, and any unique features. We consider questions of financial sustainability, comparing ownership models (e.g. membership vs cooperative), how goods are sourced (from commercial retailers' surplus or in bulk from wholesalers), staffing (volunteers, paid staff, time banking) and an operating model with wider social aims (e.g. acting as a community 'hub', providing healthy eating advice, hosting cookery lessons). On the basis of these different features, we codify the identified models into a single framework. We discuss trends in the adoption of different models – within and between countries, and over time. Finally, we assess the benefits and drawbacks of different approaches and their applicability to the UK context.

Findings

We reviewed a total of 45 models which could broadly be defined as community supermarkets already in operation, 23 in the UK and a further 22 internationally. They can be grouped under four headings:

- buying clubs
- box schemes
- co-op food stores
- redistributors of surplus food.

There is considerable variety within any one of these four models. Some use volunteers, and some restrict access to members or even impose a means test (which we consider would not be a viable alternative for a sustainable 'food bank plus' model in the UK). Others offer a wider range of community services on site, including debt advice services, cooking and budgeting classes.

A true solution to food poverty needs to be – to borrow an agricultural metaphor – ‘sustainable’ rather than ‘subsistence’ in kind. It has to do two things:

It must support people in food poverty to do more than just ‘subsist’.

This involves addressing the long-term nature of food poverty, which is more than just the sum of families’ crises. A sustainable programme should have wider aims – looking to the effects of food poverty (e.g. malnutrition, social isolation) as well as its causes (e.g. unemployment, low financial capability). The most successful programmes may well be ones that are coproduced by users themselves.

It must involve initiatives which are sustainable in themselves.

Food banks tend to rely on volunteers and donations of one kind or another (whether directly from retailers, or more widely sourced from the local community). Therefore they are restricted – first, to a model that conforms to very narrow expectations of the role of the ‘giver’ and the ‘receiver’; second, there are limits to how far they can grow. Successful alternative initiatives will allow growth and continuation, tapping into innovations in sourcing and ownership and proving their worth by creating wider social value – thereby making themselves financially sustainable if not in the short then in the longer term.

Recommendations

The report ends with a set of recommendations aimed at central and local policy makers, practitioners (including current and potential providers of different kinds of affordable food scheme) and wider stakeholders, including businesses. They are discussed below.

The Government should create and publicise a ‘conversion fund’ for food banks willing to make the transition to providing longer-term forms of affordable food initiative.

Under this scheme, food banks would be able to apply for a grant to set up a community supermarket or similar scheme.

On the model of the ‘Community Right to Challenge’ (part of the Localism Act 2011), applicants might be required to demonstrate that they met certain criteria – for example, that they answered unmet demand locally, and had a viable business plan. The Government should also consider incorporating non-financial support into the grant for successful bidders – for example, helping providers to access social investment, or linking them in to local businesses for practical support.

Accompanying the fund, the Government and Locality, the network for community-led organisations, should set a specific target to reduce the number of food banks by 50 per cent by 2020, while serving at least the same number of people on low incomes who currently access existing food banks, through existing food banks and alternative forms of affordable food provision combined.

Research by Oxfam and the Trussell Trust indicates that around 40–50 per cent of people accessing food banks do so as a temporary, crisis measure. Food banks are certainly likely to remain the most effective form of crisis support for this group. However, the remaining 50–60 per cent, who are in ‘chronic’ food poverty – whose inability to afford food is a long-term problem rather than one triggered by a financial shock – are the intended beneficiaries of the sustainable food schemes described in this report. These figures should form the basis of a target to grow sustainable affordable food schemes. With the drivers of food poverty set to worsen, we should be planning to serve *at least* as many beneficiaries as currently.

The Government should appoint a national food security champion.

In this, we echo the recent recommendation made by the House of Commons Environment, Food and rural Affairs Committee.⁵ At present, the UK has a ‘global food security champion’, but no equivalent post for the UK’s food security specifically. While the challenges for the UK are not on a par with those faced by countries in Central Africa and Central Asia, it is nonetheless short-sighted not to treat them as part of the same continuum. After all, the factors driving up food

prices, and the cost of living generally, have their origins outside the UK, in global issues, and this will continue to be the case over the coming decades as natural resources grow scarcer. A national food security champion should work closely with the existing, global champion, and should have responsibility for coordinating research and facilitating sharing of best practice, including internationally.

Health and wellbeing boards should take a coordinating role in collecting and publishing information on food poverty in a local area, and sharing it with current and potential providers of affordable food.

To work effectively, and avoid the risks of duplication, poor targeting, and/or creating false demand, local providers of affordable food schemes need access to data about the scale and nature of need among their intended beneficiaries within a neighbourhood, ward or local authority. A range of agencies routinely collect data that can contribute to a picture of local food poverty: GPs and others making statutory food bank referrals are a starting point, but a number of sources can provide a richer picture: GPs and hospital staff noting cases of malnutrition, those running breakfast clubs at schools, managers of applications for crisis loans and advisers of those seeking advice for payday loan debts. Health and wellbeing boards (HWBs) should lead the collection, coordination and publication of these data, and ensure they reach potential providers.

The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs should work with retail umbrella bodies (e.g. the British Retail Consortium) to identify and remove superfluous legislation and regulations that hinder cooperation between commercial retailers and the third sector.

Not all community supermarket models source the food they sell from retail surplus, but many do – and there is scope for such redistribution to be explored further in the UK.

Commercial retailers Demos consulted for this project highlighted legislation (closely followed by logistics) as the chief

barrier to effective redistribution. According to the terms of the Food Safety Act 1990, responsibility for the safety of food remains with the retailer even after redistribution. As a result the risks to retailers of donating surplus food too often outweigh the benefits. Government should consult retail umbrella bodies and stakeholders such as FareShare and Trussell Trust to find ways to address this.

The landfill tax on retailers should be ploughed back directly into the conversion fund.

Retailers currently have to pay a tax according to the volume of (food and non-food) waste they send to landfill. This acts as an incentive to reduce waste overall – both further up the supply chain (e.g. by reducing packaging) and, later on, by recycling. The income levied from this tax should be used to bolster the conversion fund (see recommendation above) and increase the number of outlets taking surplus food. If possible, this measure should be implemented at a matched, local level, so that in areas where retailers send more waste to landfill they contribute proportionally more money to sustainable affordable food schemes.

Redistribution of surplus food should be made the most financially attractive option for retailers.

Redistribution of surplus food may not be the cheapest alternative. Instead, one of the most popular means of recycling surplus food is sending it to be converted to renewable energy, particularly through anaerobic digestion. Redistribution, on the other hand, in addition to the food safety risks mentioned above, is associated with costs in staff time, training, potentially transportation, and so on. Recognising that redistribution – and particularly establishing a system of redistribution – may be a burden on retailers, the Government should consider subsidising food redistribution (e.g. by funding schemes such as FareShare), making this a more feasible option for retailers. A possible source of funding is the former subsidies for anaerobic digestion, which have been scheduled for reduction or removal during 2015.

1 Introduction

In 2014 the rhetoric about poverty and its causes escalated. One side of the political spectrum speaks of an ongoing ‘cost of living crisis’, and the other of a ‘culture of welfare dependency’ that has become so entrenched that some people have lost the will and skill they once had to work, plan and budget to meet their families’ needs. Nonetheless, and whatever the reason, one fact is unavoidable: more people are struggling to afford the essentials of daily living. According to the Office of Fair Trading, the value of the payday loan industry more than doubled in size between 2008/09 and 2011/12, from £900 million to £2.2 billion.⁶ People are turning to credit to supplement their income as never before and it is now less often used to fund luxury purchases, and more often to fund daily essentials.

Nowhere is the squeeze on UK living standards more visible (nor are the contributing factors more hotly contested) than in the ‘food bank phenomenon’. According to figures from the UK’s biggest food bank operator, the Trussell Trust, use of food banks increased by 163 per cent between 2012/13 and 2013/14. Statistics like these spurred the creation, in October 2013, of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hunger and Food Poverty, which published the findings of its year-long inquiry and a set of recommendations to government in December 2014.⁷

As the APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty findings demonstrate, there are a variety of drivers for the increase in the use of food banks, and increase in food poverty more generally, and we look into their causes and complexities in the next chapter. For now, we move on to a second, equally incontestable fact: food banks are not – nor are they designed to be – a long-term solution to food poverty. There are some

420 Trussell Trust food banks, and the APPG estimates, on the basis of submissions to its inquiry, that there might be at least that many operating independently.⁸ The majority operate a referral scheme, with GPs, job centres and a limited list of other designated agencies able to issue clients with three single-use vouchers per year, each equal to three days of food. That is *nine* days' worth of food out of 365.

Food banks do a truly admirable job for the purpose of short-term, crisis intervention, but they are creaking under the pressure of demand from a type of poverty whose drivers are much more intractable. To be in food poverty is not to be in a constant state of crisis. As a family of four, being down to your last tin of soup may be the point at which you access a food bank, but you remain in food poverty for as long as you are struggling to sustain yourself from one week to the next. In around 40 per cent of cases, according to Trussell Trust figures, the immediate reason for accessing a food bank is some kind of crisis – most commonly a benefits delay, or else delayed wages, being refused a loan, sickness or domestic violence. The larger proportion of those using food banks cites a longer-term situation as being the cause for seeking this help: low income, benefit changes, debt, unemployment and homelessness. For the former group, short-term support from a food bank may be enough to 'tide them over' until their situation is – if still extremely stretched – at least more stable. For the latter group, the food provided is just as valuable, but it has no such 'tiding over' effect; there is no change in their situation. We might see the two groups as 'acute' and 'chronic' – two points on a spectrum of food poverty.

None of the above is to disparage the demonstrably vital role that food banks currently play, nor the hard work and dedication of the organisations (churches, mosques, community centres and so on) and volunteers who run them. Most food banks already do a great deal besides handing out food to those in a crisis, whether formally (e.g. giving cooking classes or financial capability advice) or informally, simply through the opportunity they provide for social interaction

and a non-judgemental listening ear. Our argument is not that food banks *do not do* these things, or that they are not interested in doing so. Rather, we suggest that, as an operating model, food banks are not best suited to providing longer-term support with a wider range of issues – the sort of support from which all of their users would benefit, and which the majority really need.

This report explores alternative structures, which set those activities on a more formal footing, making it easier to demonstrate the difference they make, and hopefully combating some of the current unhelpful press comments on affordable food initiatives.

Methodology

For this research we carried out a combination of desk research and stakeholder interviews to explore the current landscape of alternative food provision in the UK, what community supermarkets look like abroad, what they might look like in the UK, what they might be able to achieve, and what the policy and practical levers and barriers are to growing them.

First, we carried out a scoping review of existing models across Europe, the US, Canada and Australia to identify different forms of ‘community supermarket’. We looked for any and all food outlets designed to sell food to the public at affordable, below market prices. To do this, we reviewed publicly available information such as accounts, annual reports and website information. We also carried out a literature review of evaluations and commentary regarding the impact of these and wider schemes.

Second, we contacted and invited to interview the directors of some of the schemes identified through the review. The data gathered in this way were used to fill in any gaps in our understanding. We asked interviewees for any relevant unpublished material or statistics they were willing to share, and explored their motivations for establishing their project(s) and their plans for the future.

In this report we present the result of a combined analysis of the quantitative and qualitative (interview) data. We compare and contrast a range of affordable food operations, the ideological motivations behind their inception, and any unique features. We consider questions of financial sustainability, comparing ownership models (e.g. membership vs cooperative), how goods are sourced (from commercial retailers' surplus or in bulk from wholesalers), staffing (volunteers, paid staff, time banking) and an operating model with wider social aims (e.g. acting as a community 'hub', providing healthy eating advice, hosting cookery lessons). On the basis of these different features, we have sorted the identified models into a single framework. We discuss trends in the adoption of different models – within and between countries, and over time. Finally, we assess the benefits and drawbacks of different approaches and their applicability to the UK context.

The report ends with a set of recommendations aimed at central and local policy makers, practitioners (including current and potential providers of different kinds of affordable food scheme) and wider stakeholders, including businesses.

2 Background: Food poverty and food banks

Food poverty as a subset of poverty

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the way that poverty is measured. Policy makers have begun to see metrics based purely on income as inadequate, for their failure to capture the lived experience of poverty. Various alternatives have been suggested, which recognise the ‘multidimensional’ nature of poverty – taking into account, for example, material deprivation, educational attainment, housing status and fuel poverty. This recognition sits at the heart of the current government’s Child Poverty Strategy, published in early 2014.⁹

A central element of the government’s measurement of low income and material deprivation is the Family Resources Survey, which uses a notional ‘basket’ of goods and services that are considered necessities for households with children. The contents of the basket are updated regularly to reflect the shifting consensus about what ‘necessities’ are. The same approach underlies the standard measures of inflation, the Consumer Prices Index (CPI) and Retail Prices Index (RPI), as well as alternative, non-governmental poverty metrics (for example, the Minimum Income Standard developed by the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University and the Family Budget Unit at the University of York). The contents of these various baskets are not all the same, however.

The term ‘basket’ is a little misleading, as its contents include more than a family’s weekly grocery shopping. Food and non-alcoholic beverages account for 23 per cent of the 700 items in the CPI basket, and 11.2 per cent of the CPI weighting.¹⁰ Alcohol and ‘catering’ (eating out) are counted separately, as are housing costs and utilities, clothes, household goods and leisure. But the concept of the ‘basket’ shows that

food has long been considered a central benchmark of the cost of living – in a way that has not, perhaps, filtered through to definitions or policies in recent years.

Food poverty, however, stands apart from other dimensions of poverty. It is captured, to an extent, in measures of disposable income and material deprivation, but it also goes beyond both. Understanding the uniqueness of food poverty is key to understanding some of the prevailing scepticism about its existence and extent, and whether efforts to combat it are worthwhile. Unlike other goods people can be ‘poor’ in – income, fuel, housing – food is both a necessity (a public good) and a consumer good. We have no choice but to eat, but at the same time a large part of our social and cultural identity, our household economy and our national economy, is predicated on our actively exercising choice in *what* to eat.

Some figures

According to statistics from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in 2011/12 some 13 million people in the UK were living in poverty (defined as people living in households with income below 60 per cent of the median for that year).¹¹ A report from the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR), defining a food-poor household as one spending more than 10 per cent of its annual income on food, suggests that some 4.7 million UK households are food poor.¹² Half a million children are thought not to be getting enough food because of poverty (rather than for other reasons, such as neglect), and qualitative research reveals that in 93 per cent of households where this is the case, at least one adult is ‘going without’ at mealtimes to supplement their children’s intake.

Defining food poverty

One factor hindering a proper understanding of food poverty is the lack of an official definition of it. Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural

Rights 1966 sets out two rights in respect of food: ‘the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living... including adequate food’ (article 11, para 1) and the ‘fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger’ (article 11, para 2).¹³ Additional legislation from 1999 clarifies the intention to apply a broad interpretation to ‘the right to adequate food’, and adds that:

*The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.*¹⁴

Rights-based legislation provides a starting point, but – because of its universality – cannot capture the complexities of the situation in any individual country, particularly a more developed country. The debate in Britain tends to centre on whether a family that is not materially deprived in all respects – who for example have more than one car, or cable television – can be said to lack the means to procure food.

Nonetheless, most can agree on the three dimensions of food poverty outlined in the Convention: affordability, access and quality (including nutritional value). Clearly, the three are interdependent; affordability is probably the most significant barrier to access for those on a low income, while the 2013 horsemeat scandal in the UK brought into sharp focus the link between quality and affordability, raising the question of whether government and industry should be doing more to protect those with least ‘consumer clout’ from being mis-sold sub-standard food.

Box 1 The Northern Irish Food Poverty Network

The Northern Irish Food Poverty Network (whose members include the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland and the food safety and nutrition organisation Safefood) is currently in the process of developing an indicator of food poverty based on routinely collected data, with the aim of measuring food poverty across Ireland to inform policy and practice.

Food poverty is a particular concern in Northern Ireland, where food bills are predicted to come joint highest in the UK with London (at £3,201) per year, despite an average gross household income that is 36.6 per cent lower than London's.¹⁵

Affordability

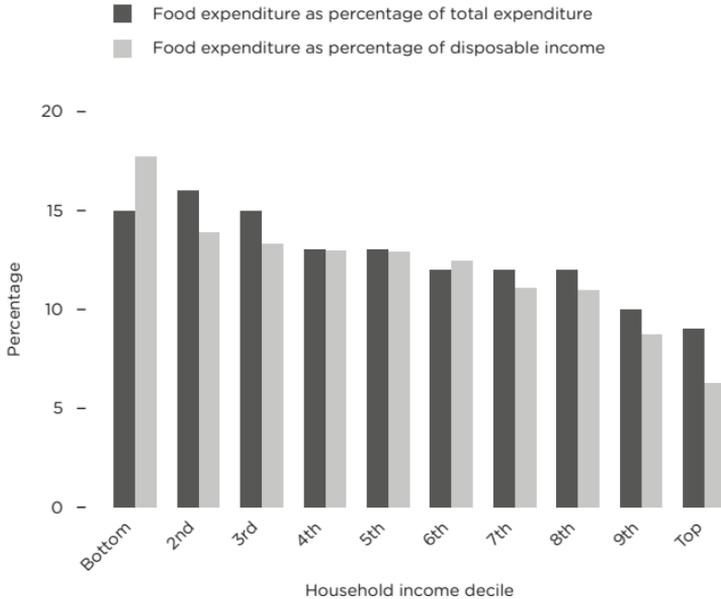
It is a well-established fact – known as ‘Engel’s law’ – that expenditure on food as a proportion of total household spend rises as you move down the income scale. This is demonstrated in figure 1, which compares household expenditure on food as a proportion of total household expenditure, and as a proportion of total household disposable income, for all income deciles. Apart from the bottom income decile, there is a clear trend that conforms to Engel’s law. Hence, the food security of poorer households is more susceptible to any increase in the price of food, any increase in the price of other items of expenditure (as these are ‘competing’ with food), and any reduction in total household income.

Not only do the poor spend relatively more of their total income and total expenditure on food and utilities, in some cases they also pay more – absolutely – for the same goods and services. This holds true for a number of reasons: credit is more expensive for those on the lowest incomes, because of their ‘high risk’ status as consumers, while their inability to pay costs upfront or commit to a regular payment precludes them from accessing some of the mechanisms by which affluent households routinely save money, such as bulk buying or paying by direct debit.¹⁷ Figures suggest that poorer households pay 6–13 per cent more on food than other households.¹⁸

Access

Access to food – in proximity and affordability – can also be affected by geographic inequalities. Low income households are more likely than average to be located in so-called ‘food deserts’, with limited access to fresh produce. Particularly in areas with a high concentration of deprived council estates,

Figure 1 **Expenditure on food as a percentage of total household expenditure and of household disposable income**



Source: ONS figures¹⁶

the most accessible (or the only) shop may be a small convenience store. These typically offer a more limited range of products than, say, a large supermarket chain, favouring pre-packaged goods over fresh meat, fish, fruit and vegetables, and – because of their size – tend to charge a higher markup, with no option for shoppers to take advantage of ‘buy one get one free’ discounts or to choose a cheaper, own-brand range. A 1997 study reported that in 20 per cent of rural and 25 per cent of urban areas, there was no fresh produce within a 500 metre walk.¹⁹ Arguably, it was the prospect of a link between food deserts and public health (e.g. increased risk of Type 2 diabetes) that inspired a ‘vogue’ for community food initiatives under the last Labour Government (see chapter 3).

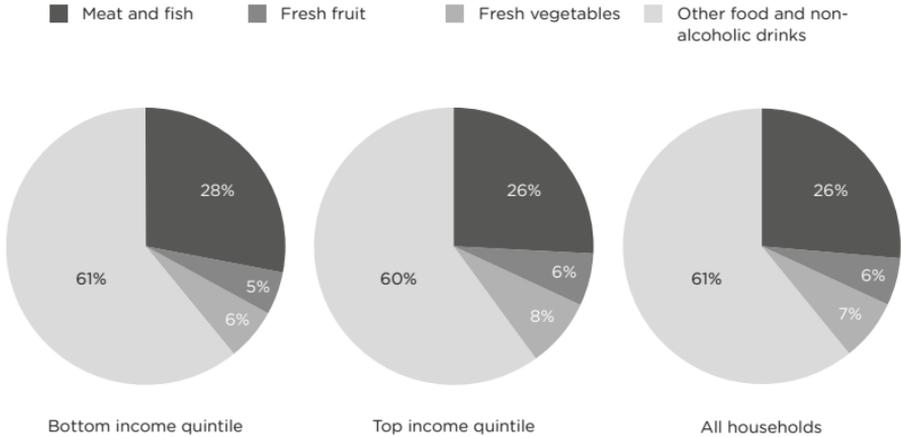
Quality

In the UK, deprivation and obesity are strongly correlated: 30 per cent of the most deprived women (measured by Indices of Multiple Deprivation) are obese, compared with 19 per cent of the least deprived; the figures for men are, respectively, 25 per cent and 22 per cent.²⁰ Thus, being food poor puts you at greater risk of obesity, but it also puts you at greater risk of malnutrition; Health and Social Care Information Centre data showed a sharp rise in the number of people admitted to hospital with malnutrition in England and Wales between 2013 and 2014 – from 5,469 to 6,520, or some 19 per cent. The jump was expressly attributed by the Faculty of Public Health to ‘extreme poverty and the use of food banks’.²¹ This illustrates the importance of ‘quality’ as a dimension of food poverty.

Rising costs have had an impact on the quality of food purchased across the board; for example, although expenditure on vegetables has risen by 15.3 per cent since 2007, the volume consumed has fallen by 8 per cent.²² On the ‘quality’ dimension, too, the poorest households are the worst affected: households in the lowest income decile purchase approximately 25 per cent less fruit and vegetables than average.²³ From the 5-a-day campaign (branded ‘partially successful’ by the chief medical officer last year²⁴) to Change4Life, a raft of initiatives exists that encourage us to increase our intake of fresh, healthy food. These address barriers such as poor awareness of nutrition, poorly planned shopping budgets, and a lack of knowledge or a lack of confidence in cooking – barriers that are based on sound evidence, and that tend to be seen more in more disadvantaged groups. However, the initiatives do not address the risk that some may be ‘priced out’ of the market for fruit and vegetables altogether, to the extent that they simply cannot afford the amount they need. Analysis of Family Spending Survey data by Demos suggests that this may be the case.

Figure 2 compares the proportion of household food expenditure spent on different types of food each week for the lowest income quintile, the highest income quintile, and the average across all quintiles. We already know (see figure 1)

Figure 2 **Breakdown of weekly food expenditure across bottom income quintile, top income quintile, and all household**



Source: ONS, *Family Spending*²⁵

about variations in food spend; for the poorest quintile the amount represented by the pie is absolutely less (£32.85), but represents a greater proportion of income (15.8 per cent), while for the top quintile the pie represents twice as much (£81.25) but is only half as large as a proportion of spending (7.5 per cent). Comparing the three charts, the most striking feature is their similarity. The poorest fifth of households spend 11 per cent of their weekly food budget on fresh fruit and vegetables – just 2 per cent under the average for all households, and just 3 per cent less than the richest fifth. This should prompt a re-evaluation of the idea that poor households spend ‘too much’ money on unhealthy foods. On the contrary, when we expect the poorest to change the way they shop, we are asking a great deal – that they not only spend more of their disposable income on food, but that they spend *more of that*, proportionally, on fruit and vegetables than the average household.

Drivers of food poverty

Food poverty is widely seen as a manifestation of the rising cost of living. The squeeze on household finances is itself driven by two trends – rising prices and shrinking wages.

Rising costs

The price of consumer baskets is rising, in both absolute and relative terms. Housing and utilities now account for around a quarter of total household spending, and recent analysis by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) suggests that this proportion may continue to rise, potentially reaching around 30 per cent by 2030.²⁶ Furthermore, rising inflation has not been borne equally across income groups, with the PwC analysis indicating a gap of 8 per cent – equivalent to around £20 a week, or £1,000 over a year – in increased household spending for the bottom, compared with the top, income decile.

The combination of straitened finances and rising prices not only reduces households' ability to withstand financial shocks, it also inhibits planning for the future. In the year to May 2014, house price inflation was running at 8.9 per cent,²⁷ rendering the cost of saving for a deposit and repaying a mortgage increasingly beyond families' capability.

Rising food costs

Food prices are notoriously hard to quantify in meaningful terms. In the UK, they are below the world average, but slightly above those of the developed regions of the world. They are the 14th lowest among the 28 EU states, having slipped down the tables significantly since 2007–08, while the best performers (Netherlands, Ireland, Portugal, France) remained similar. Nonetheless, on any measure of how they are 'felt' by consumers, food prices are on an upward trend; in the four years to 2013, they rose by 20 per cent – 6 per cent more than the rise in the rate of CPI.²⁸ At the same time, the Family Food Survey published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) notes that average household spending on food increased by 17 per cent between 2007 and 2012 – even while the amount of food purchased fell by 4.7 per cent. Food bills now

account for 11.6 per cent of total spending in average UK households, and people on lower incomes – for whom basic living costs make up a higher proportion of total spending – spend an even higher proportion of their income on food (16.6 per cent).²⁹

Shrinking wages

At the same time as food prices have increased, wages have fallen in real terms by around 7–8 per cent since 2007–08.³⁰ With gross domestic product (GDP) beginning to grow again, wages will also rise, but they are unlikely to return to pre-recession peaks until the end of this decade. In any case, the general trend masks the distribution of the squeeze and the depth of its impact on specific groups. Self-employed workers (who are excluded from standard average earnings data) have been particularly hard hit, long-term economic trends continue to favour high earners rather than those on low to middle incomes, and employment growth opportunities are concentrated in high and low-skilled jobs as against the middle.

In addition, the trend towards more part-time and temporary work, and zero-hour contracts is contributing to wage stagnation on a national economic level, and at household level to increasingly ‘precarious’ finances; being in work is less and less of a guarantee against financial shocks.

Reduced welfare safety net

Aside from employment, welfare is another major influence on general levels of household income. In the past four years there has been a raft of reforms to the benefits system, resulting in a reduction in the overall generosity of benefits, and the introduction of more stringent eligibility criteria and sanctions. Most benefits now increase at a rate of only 1 per cent per year, rather than in line with RPI or CPI, so families that rely on benefits as part of their income see a real-terms reduction in what they can afford to buy. More significantly, following radical changes to disability benefits many ill or disabled people have found they are no longer eligible for Employment

Support Allowance (ESA) (owing to stricter definitions of fitness to work) or Disability Living Allowance (as this is replaced with a new, less generous benefit – the Personal Independence Payment). As a result, hundreds of thousands of disabled people have seen substantial reductions in their benefits incomes. Added to this the so-called ‘bedroom tax’, which affects nearly a million social housing tenants, and the overall cap on benefits income – usually affecting families with large numbers of children living in high-rent areas – have led to a sudden and substantial drop in income for many millions of people in and out of work across the UK.

Of all the welfare reforms, perhaps the most significant for the precariousness of household incomes is the introduction of the conditionality regime, and the more stringent benefits sanctions that accompany it. The unemployed now face a far higher likelihood of having their benefits suspended, for weeks or months at a time, if they fail to comply with conditions (e.g. related to seeking work). In 2013 alone, more than 900,000 Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) claimants and nearly 23,000 ESA claimants received sanctions. In 2007, the equivalent figure for JSA was just under 325,000.³¹ No such comparison can be made for ESA, which was only introduced in its current form in 2008, but the homelessness charity Crisis drew attention to a ‘shocking’ 4.5-fold increase in ESA sanctions between the first quarter of 2013 and 2014.³² The most common reported reasons for sanctions are failure to participate in a scheme under the Work Programme, and failure to attend an interview with a job adviser without good reason.³³

As housing and heating costs increase, and as wages fail to keep step, households are facing untenable financial situations and are forced into tough budgeting decisions. It is this, above all, that is driving two of the most salient characteristics of poverty in 2014 – reliance on food banks and short-term, high cost credit. The ‘heat or eat’ dilemma is a real one, affecting many families in poverty (three million, according to one estimate).³⁴ When families are faced with a pot that is simply too small, fuel and food are often the first things to go. The choice to forego food is often held up as

an example of ‘poor budgeting’, but that is surely a misnomer. For families on JSA and for those experiencing debt, food and fuel may be the only cutbacks that do not come with a tangible penalty – hence, not to buy food is not ‘poor budgeting’ but the best budgeting in a bad budget situation. The report of the APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty puts it starkly: ‘No authority sends anyone to prison for being hungry.’³⁵

The ‘blame game’

As we have seen, a growing body of evidence links food poverty to the Coalition Government’s welfare reforms. A recent joint report by the Church of England, the Trussell Trust, Oxfam and the Child Poverty Action Group found that at least half of referrals made to food banks were as a result of personal financial crises provoked by benefits delays, sanctions and changes (chiefly the under-occupation penalty, called the ‘bedroom tax’, and withdrawal of working tax credits).³⁶ Nonetheless, this remains a contested area, with the Government continuing to deny any such evidential link.³⁷

International data point to a correlation between reductions in government food aid and uptake of non-governmental food aid. This would seem to lend weight to the idea of a zero sum game, in which the charitable sector is left to ‘plug gaps’ in support withdrawn by the state.³⁸ A common source of reticence about supporting food banks, on the non-government side, is the danger of ‘normalising’ affordable food support as a sphere of non-statutory activity and responsibility. Businesses have expressed concern that by supporting affordable food initiatives, they might contribute to a disincentive for government to address the drivers of food poverty, and a blurring of the responsibility between the public, private and third sectors.³⁹

The ‘blame game’ notwithstanding, there is a strong – and entirely separate – case for government action on food poverty because it saves costs further down the line. Projections suggest that in 2015 the indirect cost of obesity to society will rise to £27 billion.⁴⁰ There are wider impacts, too, where governments do not monitor food affordability – from farm

incomes, business investment, quality of animal management and land use practices, and (relatedly) cutting corners in health protection.⁴¹

With the steadily growing interest in UK food poverty as an object of study, evidence emerges which weakens the arguments against government-backed support. The most recent, DEFRA-commissioned study, finds no evidence for the oft-repeated claim that growing numbers of food banks encourage usage among those who do not really need them, thereby falsely inflating food poverty statistics (the ‘supply creates demand’ argument).⁴² On the contrary, the evidence indicates that such a causal mechanism is unlikely. Not only do users consistently describe accessing a food bank as ‘unnatural’, ‘embarrassing’ and ‘shameful’,⁴³ but the decision to do so is almost always one of last resort. There is a considerable body of research – both international and UK-based – on the strategies employed by food-insecure families in preference to accessing outside help, which range from ‘trading down’ to cheaper brands or cheaper alternatives, to buying in bulk and buying less, to parents skipping meals to supplement children’s intake, to sending children to eat – or even live – with another family member. As one study aptly puts it, ‘The success of low income groups in juggling competing financial demands is not grounds for policy makers to think all is well about food affordability.’⁴⁴

3 Community supermarkets

In chapter 2 we considered the variety of drivers of food poverty and the scale and nature of the problem in modern Britain. We also explored the contested use of food banks, which provide short-term assistance in the form of free food, as a means of addressing the needs of those in crisis. In this chapter, we consider how those not in crisis-based, but ‘chronic’ food poverty might be supported by outlets that can offer year-round access to affordable (rather than free) food. The ‘community supermarket’ has promise as a sustainable model.

Definition of a community supermarket

In the UK and internationally, community food initiatives are rethinking traditional, commercial notions of how food is bought and sold. Some have been established for quite some time (the oldest we identified, a Canadian buying club, was set up in 1971), while others seem to testify to a renewed interest in alternative food retail (we found four in the UK alone that had opened in the past five years). We have focused on the community supermarket model, which we define, for the purposes of this project, as one with the following features:

- food is *for sale* (not provided for free)
- the food sold is *groceries* as opposed to prepared meals or hot food
- food is sold at *below market prices*
- the model has a social purpose of tackling food poverty.

We thereby exclude initiatives selling only non-food items or prepared food (e.g. community cafés), those where food is

given away for free (e.g. food banks), and those where food is sold for profit – even on a loss-leading model – without a primary social purpose (e.g. low cost supermarkets Aldi and Lidl).

Scoping exercise

Demos carried out an internet-based scoping exercise, to identify community supermarket models throughout the UK and across Europe, the US, Canada and Australia. For each model identified, we looked at its website, promotional literature, and (where available) charity accounts and internal or independent evaluations. Where available, we gathered comparable data across the following indicators:

- programme prevalence and scale (national or city-wide; number of outlets)
- length of operation
- organisational structure (private or charitable, cooperative or mutual)
- funding mechanism
- staffing (paid staff or volunteers)
- source of food sold
- aims
- additional benefits or wider social value.

We reviewed 45 models already in operation: 23 in the UK and a further 22 internationally. They can be grouped, broadly, under four headings – buying clubs, box schemes, co-op food stores and redistributors of surplus food – and are described in more detail below.

Buying clubs

In a buying club, individual members select from a range of available products, and their collective orders are placed, either weekly or monthly, with a wholesaler. The bulk delivery is then sorted and distributed to members. Affordability is assured by realising economies of scale; by buying in bulk, members pay

a wholesale rather than a retail price, and by taking the burden of sorting and redistribution on themselves they cut out many of the costs associated with a 'middle man' (e.g. premises, storage). Nonetheless, there are some associated costs, and buying clubs may charge a membership fee or a per-order service charge, while some have received external grants or funding to cover start-up and running costs.

Prevalence, scale and length of operation

We found buying clubs to be the most common type of model in the US and Canada, with some in the UK. The oldest such scheme was from 1971, a number were developed in the mid-1990s, and a couple more joined in the early (pre-recession) 2000s.

Organisational structure

All buying clubs operate as membership groups, ranging in size from a few dozen to a few hundred members. Six out of the eight we identified were cooperatives, and all but one scheme was open to all-comers. The exception was an initiative targeted at an inner city black and minority ethnic community in the US. A further scheme was open to all in theory, but retained a target demographic that included recent immigrants, people on a low income, and older people. Where information on membership fees was available, these ranged from \$5 (*c.*£3.20) to \$50 (*c.*£32.20) per year, and at least one levied a percentage of the order price as a service charge.

Funding mechanism

From the available information, all schemes appeared to be not for profit. Information on funding was not readily available (in websites, promotional materials, and so on). Among those that did provide detail, many did not require external funding as costs were absorbed into the operating model – covered either by the order price or by additional administrative fees. One had received start-up funding from grant makers and had become self-sufficient after its first two years. Another received ongoing funding for its overhead costs from a combination of government and charitable grants.

Staffing

Not a great deal of information was available on staffing, but volunteer posts – either temporary or longer-term – were common. Volunteers were involved in sorting orders, and were sometimes based at depots. One UK-based scheme (a cooperative) required members to work as volunteer staff in rotation.

Source of food sold

The majority of schemes sourced their food from wholesalers and larger distributors. In the US and Canada, these were often specialist distributors of ‘natural’ and organic foods. UK-based schemes were more likely to involve smaller scale wholesalers and have some role for local producers and retailers – for example, one London-based scheme used a market trader to deliver orders.

Aims

Perhaps because of their generally larger size, US and Canadian schemes were more likely than UK-based schemes to have stated aims published on their website or promotional literature. Common aims in the US and Canada were to provide food that is ‘of good quality’, ‘healthy’ or ‘natural’, ‘ethical’ and ‘affordable’, or at ‘low’ or ‘discounted’ prices. Several schemes mentioned ‘food security’ specifically, and two were more explicitly political – mentioning minimising environmental harm, and emphasising self-determination and giving the target population ‘leadership in the food security movement’.

Additional benefits and wider social value

Two schemes in Canada and the US offered (respectively) community kitchens, courses in nutrition and cooking skills, and urban agriculture through the operation of two gardens or mini-farms. One London-based scheme offered value through co-locating grocery collection in a church hall with a crèche and coffee morning.

Box schemes

Box schemes are another form of collective purchase, operating on similar lines to buying clubs. Members pay a set price for a box (or bag) of produce, which is delivered either weekly or monthly. Purchases are usually restricted to fruit and vegetables, which are again bought in bulk and sorted. There is often an emphasis on sourcing from local farmers and producers.

Prevalence, scale and length of operation

Our scoping exercise revealed box schemes to be primarily a UK phenomenon; all of those we identified were UK-based (six in England, one in Wales). The oldest was set up in 1993, with most from the mid-2000s (pre-recession) and a couple established more recently.

Organisational structure

All schemes we found were open to all. Four out of the seven were run as cooperatives, and one was run by a community interest company (a form of social enterprise – a business whose activities are deemed to benefit the wider community, not just its owners or members). Apart from the social enterprise, where profit from food sales was reinvested into the business, all schemes were not for profit.

Funding mechanism

The funding mechanism for the box schemes we identified was not entirely clear. Four of the seven stated explicitly that costs were covered by food sales, and this may have been true for all. Certainly, even if they were now financially self-sufficient, two had raised start-up funds. In one case, start-up funding had been obtained from a dedicated, county-wide community food fund.

Staffing

Four of the seven box schemes were entirely volunteer-run – in fact, one was run by a single individual who was unpaid. One scheme, consisting of five co-ops twinned with

children's centres in a local area, employed one paid member of staff per store with additional volunteers. The one social enterprise in this group employed paid staff for a short period, as one of its aims was to provide disadvantaged people with paid work experience and a route into (or back into) the labour market.

Source of food sold

Box and bag schemes tended to have an emphasis on local and seasonal food, sourcing produce from (groups of) local farmers and producers. This was often accomplished directly, but not exclusively so; some smaller operations used intermediaries to do the sourcing, such as the commercial vegetable box retailer Abel and Cole, a local farmers' cooperative, and local retailers.

Aims

The most common aims were, again, affordability and quality (expressed as 'healthy' and 'fresh' food). Several schemes had an ethical dimension, connected to the organic food movement, or to sustainability and resilience. One university-based scheme had a political aim: to give student users 'input into where their food comes from', while another talked about 'reconnecting' people with food. The sole social enterprise had an additional aim of improving labour market outcomes for local disadvantaged people.

Additional benefits and wider social value

One UK scheme included recipe cards and leaflets (e.g. from Age UK) with its orders, while another ran an allotment. The social enterprise provided employment to disadvantaged young people and delivered on-the-job training. It donated any excess produce to other organisations that supported disadvantaged people.

Co-op food stores

These are stores that sell a wide range of food (and often other products, too). Products are again often wholefoods and bulk foods. Co-ops may be member-owned or worker-owned, and use a range of membership and staffing models, with owners, members and staff overlapping in different ways. Many stores require an upfront investment from members. This may be in the form of a 'loan stock' bond – a way for co-ops (and certain other companies) to raise additional capital, where the amount sought either exceeds the maximum shareholding, or is raised from a wider pool of people than are eligible to hold shares; for a worker-owned co-op, customers might invest via loan stock.

Most also require or encourage members to give their time, either by making it a membership requirement to work shifts, or by giving discounts in exchange for shifts worked. Some stores are only open to members, while others allow non-members to shop but charge them a higher markup. Co-ops are most often found in Australia, the US and the UK.

Prevalence, scale and length of operation

Co-ops proved the most common community food initiative in our scoping exercise. They were also the most geographically dispersed, with several models from the US, Australia, and the UK. They also tended to be long-running; a number had been set up in the 1970s. At least two had grown out of buying clubs.

Organisational structure

With one exception – an Australian network of five stores for the exclusive use of the Aboriginal community – membership was open to all. Membership fees varied, from a formal US\$250 (£161) equity share to a token membership of 1p. Schemes based in the US and Canada were more likely to require a sizeable formal investment (though these were generally refundable, and there were examples of sliding fee scales based on income and concessionary rates for those on low incomes), while UK-based schemes had token membership fees (£2, £1, 1p) or none at all. One of the 15 schemes reviewed was a for-profit venture; the rest were not for profit.

Funding mechanism

The large majority of cooperatives – particularly in the US, Canada and Australia – were financially self-sufficient, with costs covered by membership fees or members' investments, or sometimes by prices alone (in a couple of cases, this was achieved by a small markup, though prices were still kept below retail price). One or two schemes received additional funding from grants or donations. Two UK-based schemes received local authority funding – one, a social enterprise, was part-funded by the NHS and local authority to promote healthy eating and healthy lifestyle choices; another was part-funded by a number of local grant makers (e.g. start-up support) and by the (former) primary care trust.

Staffing

We found a marked difference between staffing arrangements within and outside the UK. Internationally, co-ops are most commonly staffed by member volunteers, sometimes with additional paid managers (who may or may not themselves be members). Several US and Canadian schemes had formal volunteering arrangements, with members either required to work (e.g. 2 hours per month) as a condition of membership, or incentivised to do so by additional discounts.

Source of food sold

It may or may not be significant that co-ops' websites and promotional literature did not place as much emphasis on food sourcing as other models did. Where such information was available, the focus was on small and/or local producers (often with the caveat 'where possible' – implying that exclusively local schemes were not always viable). One US scheme guaranteed that all its food came from within 500 miles. Wholesalers were another common source, specifically those selling wholefoods or organic foods, or with some other ethical focus. One UK-based scheme also sold retail surplus.

Aims

Co-ops tend to unite a number of aims. Most cite access to food that is healthy and of high quality, for prices that are ‘low’, ‘affordable’ and ‘fair’. They also aim to be a more ethical alternative to traditional retailers, variously mentioning sustainability, a ‘responsible business model’, minimal packaging and/or waste reduction.

Ethical considerations overlap with type of food supplied; nine of 15 schemes supplied mainly or exclusively organic food, and three stocked Fairtrade products. For many, the cooperative model was an integral part of the project aim (rather than a means to achieving other aims e.g. affordability); several schemes’ websites mentioned cooperation, democracy, community collaboration, social and economic development, community participation and inclusion, solidarity, and the opportunity to ‘explore food issues’. A small cooperative network in rural Australia, targeted exclusively at the regional Aboriginal community, had the unique, additional aim of ‘recognising [the] cultural heritage’ of its members.

Additional benefits and wider social value

Buying clubs and box (or bag) schemes do not generally have physical premises – only for sorting or collection – unlike co-ops. This affords them more scope to provide additional services, from a café and free childcare for shoppers to a credit union, and a host of clubs and classes.

Larger schemes offered education and activities related to their mission – e.g. cooking classes, market gardens and allotments, and information on ethical food, shopping, recycling, and reducing food waste. One scheme had a formal, 12-week internship programme for young mothers, teaching them about the grocery business. Another operated stalls in care homes, sheltered housing and community centres.

Redistributors of surplus food

These schemes sell on surplus products originally destined for supermarket shelves. Surplus can arise at various points in the supply chain. Food that has been damaged, mislabelled or discontinued may be redistributed straight from the manufacturer. Later in the chain, there is also 'back of store' surplus, which might be due to anything from supply errors to a sudden change in customer demand (most often resulting from a change in the weather!). The redistribution outlets may have stock donated, or buy it at a very low cost.

These are usually run as 'closed' schemes, requiring customers to meet eligibility criteria (e.g. by providing proof of low income) and there may be further restrictions, e.g. customers only allowed access for a certain number of weeks or months, or for a certain number of visits, or a spending limit. Schemes based on redistribution are particularly well established in the rest of Europe, with interest growing in the UK.

Prevalence, scale and length of operation

Excess stock schemes were the most popular type of community food initiative in Europe – and in fact (at least according to the results of our scoping exercise) exclusive to Europe. Four of the 11 we identified were in the UK. Compared with the other three models, they were a fairly recent phenomenon, with more than half postdating the recession – suggesting that these models may be effective responses to sudden crises of household income.

Organisational structure

Most schemes (eight of 11) had specific eligibility criteria related mainly to low income – for example <€900 (c.£700) per month, or disposable income of <€10 (c.£8) per day, or receipt of income-related benefits – but one scheme used additional criteria including number of children. Eligibility may be enforced and monitored through a referral system (as for the majority of UK food banks) and in one case periodic reviews. Further restrictions may apply, covering catchment areas,

frequency and/or duration of access to a scheme, and size of spend. One scheme was a funded pilot, with the capability to serve only 500 customers. All but one scheme was not for profit.

Funding mechanism

In general, schemes on this model were more likely to be dependent on external funding and less likely to be financially self-sufficient (although at least one had the aim of becoming so in the longer term). Only four of the ten not-for-profit schemes reported that food sales covered costs, a further four mentioned 'fundraising', 'donations' and 'sponsorship' without being more specific, while two (in France and the Netherlands) received some help with running costs from local or central government.

Staffing

Less information was available on staffing for this type of scheme. Websites and other promotional literature appeared to show a mixture of volunteer-only, staff-only and mixed workforces.

Source of food sold

All schemes of this type by definition sourced food from excess stock, but there was considerable variation in how this was achieved. Excess goods may be unsellable for a variety of reasons – they may be damaged, aesthetically unacceptable (e.g. blemished fruit and vegetables) or past their 'sell by' or 'use by' date, or they may be otherwise perfect but simply surplus to requirements, the result of a supply error, missed transport connections, or simply a sudden change in the weather that precipitates a change in consumer demand. Likewise, excess can be generated at different points in the supply chain, by producers, wholesalers or retailers. Some schemes used wholesalers exclusively, others had 'sponsorship' relationships with retailers, and others used a mixture. In some cases, this was supplemented by other sources – for example, one social supermarket chain runs a farm which is an additional source of fresh fruit and vegetables for its stores, and a couple of schemes accepted donations of food from individuals.

Aims

Unsurprisingly given the targeted nature of these schemes, many people we spoke to mentioned alleviation of poverty as a primary aim. Uniquely among the four models, excess stock schemes often reported an aim to promote ‘autonomy’, ‘dignity’, ‘choice’ and ‘access to consumer experience’. Managers of some schemes were emphatic about offering only short-term, crisis support (e.g. the aim ‘to return households to regular life as soon as possible’. Price (‘low cost’, ‘affordable’, ‘cheap’, ‘value for money’) was again important, as was local sourcing (some schemes talked about reducing ‘food miles’) and waste reduction.

Additional benefits and wider social value

Excess stock schemes were often located in shared community spaces, and it was common for their users to have access to other forms of support – social services, employment support, advice and signposting for health and social care issues, classes (e.g. parenting, cooking, beauty, CV-writing). Some also offered hot meals or a café, and many actively encouraged socialising.

The appendix provides a summary of the key differences between the four models.

Case study: ANDES

Established in 2000, the Association Nationale de Développement des Epicerie Solidaires (ANDES), the National Association for the Development of Solidarity Supermarkets, has so far helped to create around 50 stores across France. Member shops place weekly orders for ten types of fruit and vegetables, which are processed centrally and distributed to them. Food is sourced from retail surplus in the first instance, and supplemented with bulk-bought stock where necessary. It is sold for 20 per cent of the market price. Access to the social supermarkets is restricted; clients have to demonstrate financial need, and their access to the shop is time-limited. They work with staff from the shop or social services partners to co-create a plan, which might involve saving to pay their rent or fix their car, and the plan dictates

the length of time for which they have access to the shop. Alongside food, ANDES offers training and job opportunities. Nearly two-thirds (60 per cent) of its funding comes from the state, and a further 15 per cent from local authorities; it generates additional funding by producing soup, which is sold for a profit in mainstream supermarkets. The organisation's philosophy is to preserve people's dignity and agency.

Trends

Figures 3 and 4 show the relative growth over time of different community supermarket models in Australia, Canada, European countries except the UK, the UK and the US, according to the schemes we identified. Note that the scoping exercise intentionally focused on the UK, identifying as many UK-based schemes as schemes across the other countries combined. Therefore, these figures provide a more reliable snapshot of relative growth than absolute numbers.

Perhaps the clearest finding is that, across all countries and models, community food initiatives are not new. The figures show that there has been more rapid growth since the recession – 2010 was the modal (most common) year in which our identified models commenced operation) – but this is a continuation of a much longer-term trend, and could hardly be described as a 'spike'. The evidence thus demonstrates that community food initiatives are *not* a response to household-level crises precipitated by the recession; this should give policy makers pause: if they have existed for a while, they are likely to be answering a real demand, and that demand is likely to be sustained.

Of the four models, the one to have gained strong ground in recent years (in the UK and the rest of Europe) is excess stock. This fits with the trend, identified above, for businesses to want to be seen to be doing more to combat food poverty. Also, excess stock models tend to be the ones most associated with food *poverty* as opposed to more cross-sectional demand for affordable food, or a combined demand for affordable *and* local food.

Community supermarkets

Figure 3 **Different types of community supermarkets in Australia, Canada, European countries, the UK and the US, by type of scheme**

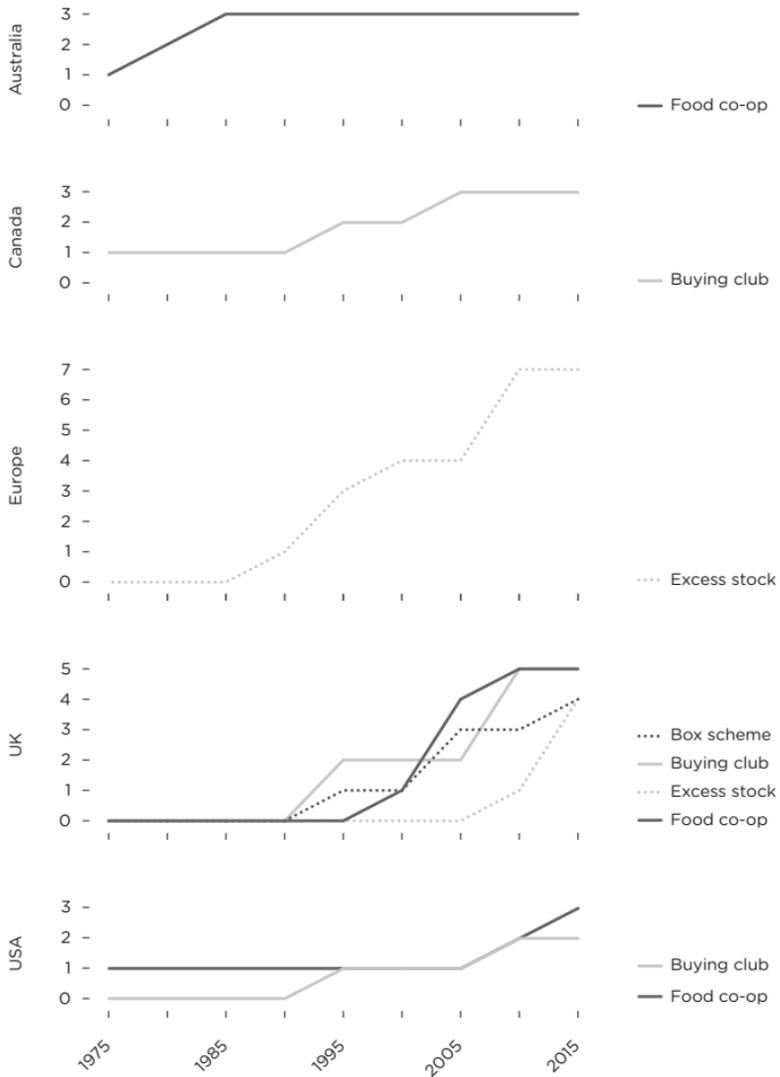
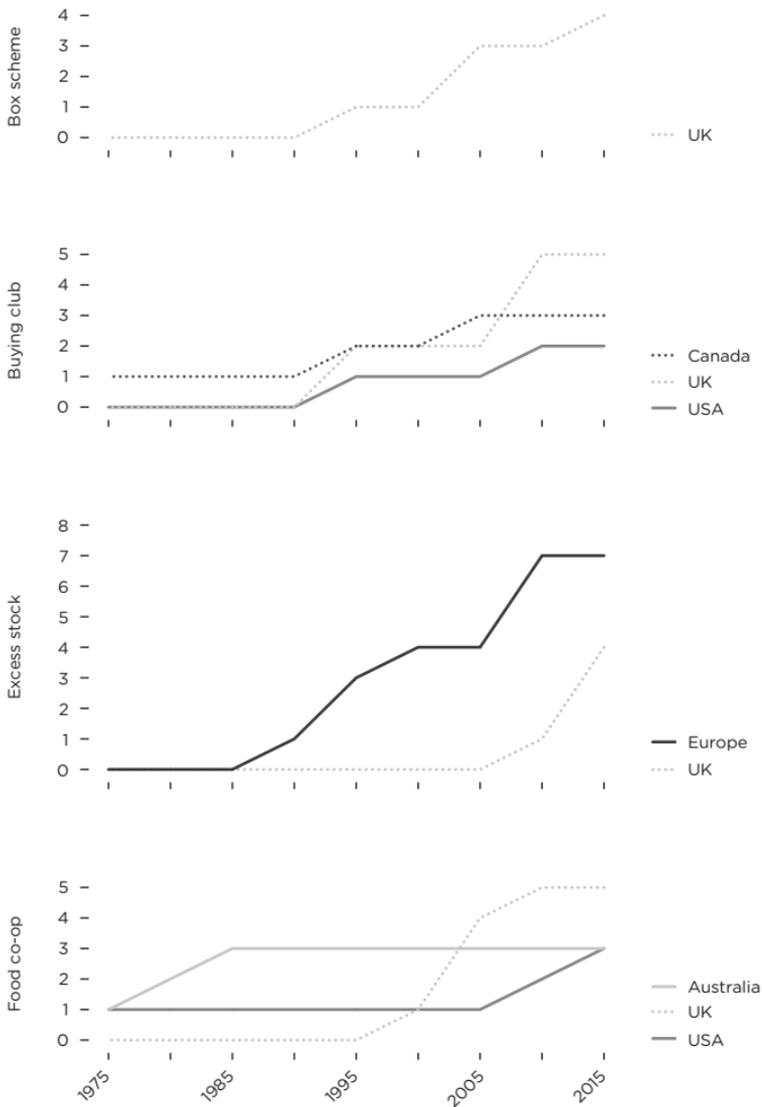


Figure 4 **Different types of community supermarkets in Australia, Canada, European countries, the UK and the US, by country**



A great many initiatives exist that seek, in one way or another, to address lack of access to healthy, affordable food. For every one of the 45 community food initiatives we have surveyed, there are several more that do not fit within our criteria. These may be government- or community-led, or they may be fully fledged, for-profit businesses; they may be targeted at a subset of people with specific needs or open to all; they may be building-based or they may not have a physical location; they may provide just fruit and vegetables, a wider range of groceries, or prepared meals; they may or may not charge a fee. Food banks and community supermarkets are just two examples, on a list which includes (but is by no means limited to):

- food provided via community care (e.g. Meals on Wheels)
- food stamps or vouchers
- school breakfast clubs
- (older people's) lunch or supper clubs
- collective kitchens
- soup runs
- food growing schemes and community allotments
- city farm shops.

Any of these might provide formal or informal non-food support alongside the affordable food offer, such as emotional support, mentoring, practical help, or co-location with other amenities. Indeed, many providers reportedly consider these aspects of their operation particularly important.⁴⁵ Because those who access affordable food initiatives do so after exhausting other options, when they do, they are more likely to use the full range of support on offer.⁴⁶ A degree of diversity is a good in itself in community initiatives of any kind, as recognised by the report of the APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty.

Alongside calling for a 'food bank plus' model, the report supports the continuation of ('traditional') food banks, because of their proven ability to penetrate sections of society often labelled 'hard to reach'. Like the APPG on

Hunger and Food Poverty, we welcome the community-level response to food poverty, but we also recognise that widespread, long-term success depends on the building of an evidence base. We believe that the findings of this chapter lay the foundations for this.

4 Meeting the UK challenge

Chapter 3 set out the findings from a scoping study of existing community food initiatives (broadly defined as ‘community supermarkets’) in the UK, the US, Canada and Australia. These were divided into four types of scheme – buying clubs, box schemes, co-op food stores and redistributors of surplus food – and placed into a framework that compared and contrasted their prevalence, scale and length of operation, their organisational structures and funding mechanisms, their staffing arrangements, how they sourced their food, their aims, and any wider social value they offered. We saw that these features varied across and within schemes, and from one country to another.

This chapter briefly discusses the challenges that a community supermarket in the UK will have to address and how, based on the evidence of our scoping exercise, this might work best. We begin by considering some findings from previous scoping studies in the UK.

Food programmes in the UK

Demand for affordable food is not a post-recession phenomenon. A review carried out in 2007 paints a picture of a burgeoning, pre-recession community food landscape. It describes such initiatives as ‘in vogue’, regarded as somewhat of a panacea for a variety of social ills, from poverty to obesity. Public (local authority) funding for them was therefore readily available – though less often accompanied by the requirements (e.g. evidence of financial sustainability, ‘theory of change’, outcomes measurement process) that have, with the squeeze on local authority finances, become prerequisites for commissioning. As a result, the authors of the review observed

that initiatives showed a tendency towards ‘mission creep’; under pressure to reinvent themselves to fit new and rapidly changing funding agendas. This reportedly had a negative impact on the reception of projects within communities and, consequently, on their longevity.⁴⁷ Finally, the study found that providers’ and users’ perceptions of projects were sometimes at odds, with users seeing them simply as a way of feeding themselves and their families, ignoring any wider stated aims.

More generally, the 2007 review found that initiatives with ‘exclusive’ models of ownership tended to be less effective and shorter lived. The same was true where schemes were not user led, had an air of being ‘parachuted in’, a ‘focus on fulfilling professional agendas’, and were powered by short-term funding. By contrast, the most likely initiatives to be successful (after government initiatives) were those characterised by clear aims and objectives and ‘based on sound principles of community involvement and needs assessment’, including consultation, ongoing involvement or ownership, scope for reconciling different agendas, and ongoing funding. Furthermore, whether initiatives are popular, grow and continue may be the most important outcomes to those who use food initiatives.⁴⁸ Initiatives that had been allowed time to establish themselves also tended to be more successful than others.

Future directions

The economist Amartya Sen argues for a view of food poverty based less on access than on ‘entitlement to access’.⁴⁹ Thus, a solution to food poverty needs to have in its sights longer-term changes to the economic structures that have put this entitlement out of people’s reach. Underlying the 2007 review is a suggestion that in ploughing resources into local food initiatives the Government has been distracted from its inaction in some of the spheres that drive food prices – business, for example, regeneration and planning.

A true solution to food poverty needs to be – to borrow an agricultural metaphor – ‘sustainable’ rather than at ‘subsistence’ level. It has to do two things:

Support people in food poverty to do more than just ‘subsist’.

It must address the long-term nature of food poverty, which is more than just the sum of families’ crises. A sustainable programme should have wider aims – looking to the effects of food poverty (e.g. malnutrition, social isolation) as well as its causes (e.g. unemployment, low financial capability). The most successful programmes may well be coproduced by users themselves.

Involve initiatives which are sustainable in themselves.

Food banks tend to rely on volunteers and donations of one kind or another (whether directly from retailers, or more widely sourced from the local community). They are therefore restricted to a model that conforms to very narrow expectations of the role of the ‘giver’ and the ‘receiver’, and has limits on how far they can grow. Successful alternative initiatives will be ones that allow growth and continuation, tapping into innovations in sourcing and ownership and proving their worth by creating wider social value – thereby making themselves financially sustainable if not in the short then in the longer term. These two requirements lead to a set of six practical challenges:

- pass on affordable prices to customers
- reach those most in need
- address underlying drivers
- achieve the right operating scale
- find a sustainable source of food
- be or become financially sustainable.

These are outlined below and lessons that might be brought to bear from our scoping exercise are briefly discussed.

Practical challenges

Pass on affordable prices to customers

All the models explored in chapter 3 had provision of affordable food as an aim, but in some cases – for buying clubs, box schemes and some co-ops – this was secondary to another social

purpose such as giving access to healthy (organic and ‘whole’) or ethical (organic and Fairtrade) food. Understandably, given that the large majority of schemes we identified predated the recent recession, *relatively* few had poverty alleviation on their radar. In the post-recession UK, however – and particularly now that the APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty has thrown down the gauntlet for developing a ‘food bank plus’ model – affordability must be paramount.

Existing models, as we have seen, use a variety of levers to pass on value, including collective purchase from wholesale, charging membership fees, volunteer staffing, and sourcing from retail surplus. Not all of these fit the bill equally well. The schemes that focus on organic, wholefood and Fairtrade products, for instance, merely deliver relatively better value for products that are still intrinsically more expensive; they are not delivering absolute best value. Also less than ideal are schemes where prices of goods are low, but whose operation depends on an upfront investment from customers (in the form of membership fees or shares). This was the case for some of the longer established buying clubs and co-ops, especially those in the US and Canada. Even with the concessions that are often applied, the sums involved may be prohibitive for low income households in the UK.

On the other hand, there is a line to be drawn. Extremely cheap food is not necessarily the best solution, either. Excess stock schemes, which offer the lowest prices, are in many respects the least sustainable of all the models. These were the least likely to be (or to become) financially self-sufficient, relying heavily on external funding. They also usually needed to apply strict eligibility criteria (and other limits on access), as a way of controlling supply (as retail surplus is, at least currently, a fairly unstable source of products) and curbing demand (as, with such low prices, there is a risk of consumers becoming too dependent).

Affordable membership fees (if such were possible) – perhaps on a sliding scale to reflect income differences – and/or the requirement to volunteer, or the opportunity to obtain a further discount for doing so, might be preferable ways of keeping costs down.

Reach those most in need

Box schemes and buying clubs, in particular, are often seen as the preserve of the middle classes, as they deliver organic, farm-fresh food to wealthy city-dwellers. That these collective purchase mechanisms are used more by the more affluent than the impoverished has to do with more than price; it conforms to a wider truth that being poor means being less able to ‘vote with your feet’ – to set up or access alternative models of any kind, from energy companies to finance to food.

At their inception, community supermarkets will have to grapple with the problem of what has been called the ‘sharp-elbowed middle class’. Insuring against financial barriers, like prohibitive membership fees (see above) is of course important, but engaging the poorest consumers involves more than that. Retail surplus schemes tend to use targeting and means-testing systems. As explained above (in the discussion on passing on affordable prices to customers), this is likely to be at the cost of scheme sustainability, and may promote a sense of stigma. For an alternative, it is helpful to consult the evidence base for community food initiatives in the UK, which links success to their being owned, directed by and embedded in local communities.⁵⁰

Address underlying drivers

The report of the APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty is right to call for an enhanced model, distinct from the temporary, crisis support offered by food banks, that can devote time and resource to tackling the underlying drivers of food poverty. By and large, the excess stock schemes we scoped were not well suited to this aim; many provided food at subsidised or artificially low prices; some applied a time limit and explicitly described themselves as giving temporary or crisis support.

However, two schemes in our review offer examples of innovative models that combine food sourced from retail surplus with longer-term support. One is the French social supermarket organisation ANDES (see case study above) and the other is the UK-based Community Shop, which runs supermarkets in Goldthorpe, South Yorkshire and (newly)

in Lambeth, South London, and is an initiative of Company Shop, the UK's largest redistributor of retail surplus. Understandably, the ability to deliver support alongside food depends on a number of conditions – eligibility criteria, limits on numbers of customers, and the length of time for which they can access the scheme, for example.

We also found a plethora of examples of schemes addressing wider needs more indirectly – running allotments, volunteer opportunities (sometimes with on-the-job training), cooking classes, financial advice, and so on. Again, schemes without the resources to offer such support themselves often benefited from co-location with other community services. Finally, although not a solution in itself, it is important not to forget that the democratic, community ownership element of community supermarkets in itself helps to address in a long-term sense the broader and intangible drivers of poverty – for example, isolation and a sense of disenfranchisement. Co-ops were the most likely models to make a feature of this.

Achieve the right operating scale

Many community supermarket models rely on economies of scale in order to sell produce at below market prices – an approach which can be disrupted if they try and increase their reach to new local areas. Supply and demand need to be balanced without compromising other aims (e.g. affordability, access). We have seen (see discussion on passing on affordable prices to customers) how this problem affects retail surplus schemes.

There is also a wider risk of losing local trust if community supermarket operators lose their 'local' identity and become national brands. This conforms to an observable trend whereby alternatives to commercial models become 'victims of their own success' – as they become large enough to be a viable source of competition with commercial models, they are regarded with more suspicion and less support. This phenomenon applies to charity retail, for example, where other retailers' support for charity shops has decreased as they have benefited from the recession.⁵¹

More research and careful planning will be needed to quantify the optimum operating scale for community supermarkets, which will allow them to deliver the best outcomes to the largest number of people, in the long term – and, crucially, maintain the support of other stakeholders in the community. A good way of achieving this might be through networks of community supermarkets, which retain (or even increase) economies of scale across a number of smaller, localised projects, while allowing each individual project to retain its local identity and remain responsive to local needs. This is the approach taken by ANDES. Regional or national networks may also alleviate the ‘trust’ problem by giving a voice to an otherwise disparate sector. Another way for models to manage scale is by sourcing products through a third party, rather than establishing connections with (for example) wholesalers and retailers themselves. In the UK, Company Shop and the much smaller FareShare exist for this purpose, and there is room for the sourcing of products through third parties to be expanded.

Find a sustainable source of food

Sourcing from wholesale is perhaps the most reliable food supply; the store (in a co-op) or the consumer (in a buying club) has control over its stock, and supply can within reason be increased to meet demand. Nonetheless, as we have seen, models which source from wholesale are not necessarily able to pass on the best value to customers. This is in contrast with sourcing from local producers (where supply may fall short of demand), from wholesale or retail surplus (where the volume and nature of products is unpredictable) or from individual donors. All of these enjoy better value, at the cost of reliability.

Many UK commentators, not least the APPG on Hunger and Food Poverty, have seized on retail surplus as the answer to sustainable sourcing. Indeed, viewing the food poverty statistics alongside the waste statistics – for example, that the UK generates 4.4 million tonnes of avoidable food waste per year⁵² – it is hard *not* to link the two. Although on paper the retail share of food waste is small, supermarkets

have been accused of pushing the burden onto the customer – through aggressively marketed ‘buy one get one free’ offers, for example.⁵³ In the course of this research, we spoke to a representative from one of the leading UK supermarkets, which was involved in surplus distribution through FareShare. The business had seen tangible benefits. The increased monitoring of waste had led to better waste management in all shops involved in redistribution schemes.

Nonetheless, we heard that there was much more to be done. First, current health and safety legislation forces supermarkets to be risk averse when donating surplus; since the responsibility for the food usually remains with the supermarket, it has to be sure that those running the initiative that receives the stock will exercise good judgement about whether the food is past its best. Businesses we spoke to praised third party redistributors of surplus stock, but they noted that these could add a further layer of complexity – the supermarket was still further removed from the beneficiaries.

The state of health and safety legislation might be seen as the ‘stick’, but we heard that the ‘carrot’ (the incentives), too, were ineffective. At present, retailers receive incentives for diverting food from landfill to anaerobic digestion (and other energy conservation initiatives), which can make this a more attractive option than redistribution. The House of Lords European Union Committee has recently discussed what tax incentives might be leveraged to equalise or prioritise redistribution.⁵⁴

There are grounds for optimism about the potential for redistribution to become a widespread method of disposal. In 2013, the findings of two initiatives by WRAP UK, the Waste and Resources Action Programme in the UK, and a food redistribution industry working group suggest that a lack of communication and collaboration within the sector and between the private and charitable sectors, rather than legislation, might be the biggest challenges.⁵⁵ The largest and longest established processor of surplus stock, Company Shop, has worked closely with the retail industry to overcome

these barriers; it describes itself as ‘focussed on protecting brand values through a controlled method of disposal of residual product’.⁵⁶

Be or become financially sustainable

Our scoping exercise revealed that models which ask members for an upfront investment and/or charge membership fees are the least likely to require additional funding, even for their start-up costs. At the other end of the spectrum, initiatives that distribute retail surplus, and some UK-based food co-ops, may rely on continuing charitable, NHS and local authority funding.

As we have seen in the discussion on passing on affordable prices to customers, membership fees and investments may well be unfeasible in the UK context. On the other hand, we do not advocate continued reliance on sources of government funding – or even of charitable funding – where this can be avoided. Notwithstanding the fact that such a request is unlikely, given the prevailing political scepticism of food poverty, to be warmly received by budget holders, we also recognise the need to move provision of food to people in longer-term food poverty out of the realms of either the welfare state or the charitable sector. Models should use whatever levers they can – volunteer staffing (ideally through membership and time-bank arrangements), co-location and affordable membership fees – to achieve financial self-sufficiency without compromising on value to customers. At the same time, there is an important role for government apart from providing long-term funding: funding start-up costs and revisiting the balance of incentives to facilitate and promote business support for community supermarkets.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

This report began by referring to the recent ‘food bank phenomenon’ in the UK. It is important to recognise, though, that demand for affordable food more generally is neither recent nor localised. In the UK, as in all the countries examined in our scoping exercise (see chapter 3), various forms of affordable food initiatives have existed for decades. Thanks in large part to the admirable work of the Trussell Trust, there tends to be more information about food banks, and they are better covered (for better or worse) by the media and therefore embedded in the public consciousness than other food initiatives; there is less knowledge among the public about existing alternatives.

Apart from the data collected by the Trussell Trust, the general lack of data contributes to ignorance about food poverty and the acute demand for affordable food, justifying the lack of political will to engage with the issue, and hampering efforts to improve coordination and innovation within a sector where it is badly needed. The irony here is that the criticisms of food programmes (which, as we saw, are largely baseless) risk becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy; no existing evidence points to supply creating demand, or to people accessing support they do not really need, but where support is poorly coordinated the risk of this happening is much increased.

In September 2013, Frank Field MP wrote a letter to the prime minister, expressing his concern that food banks were ‘becoming an institutional part of our welfare state’.⁵⁷ The Archbishop of York John Sentamu has also cautioned that food banks are here to stay.⁵⁸ Certainly, the demand for affordable food is not going to disappear in the near future; the drivers of food poverty are set only to intensify.

What little evidence exists shows that food banks are not a sustainable solution to food poverty. This is *not* to say that food banks serve ‘the wrong people’, or that they are not a genuine lifeline to all they serve. Rather, what we argue is that the 50–60 per cent of people currently accessing this lifeline whose problems are more chronic than acute would benefit more – and more lastingly – from support on a different model: one which allows them to purchase affordable food year-round, rather than wait for an inevitable crunch point and a short-term, food bank solution. As a starting point, we need better recognition of different types of need for food, and how best to meet them.

Community supermarkets, the focus of this research, offer a favourable alternative for the greater proportion of food bank users whose difficulties are chronic. Profiting from alternative models of ownership (e.g. cooperative), running (e.g. users as volunteers), product sourcing (e.g. retail surplus), they have the potential to deliver a number of benefits. They:

- address the underlying drivers of food poverty (e.g. debt, capabilities)
- address related issues that go beyond food poverty, thus introducing scope for funding tied to wider initiatives such as public health, housing and adult education
- are empowering, often involving users in the way they are run
- involve a broader section of the community, thus removing some of the stigma associated with schemes aimed specifically at ‘the neediest’.

Notwithstanding these benefits, community supermarkets are in their infancy in the UK. There are a number of associated challenges at all stages, from setup to sustainability. Below, we set out seven recommendations for policy makers and charities that will ease the transition – which we believe is a necessary one – to a sustainable affordable food landscape for the UK.

Recommendations

Support to transition and scale up

At present, councils are reportedly providing some £3 million a year in funding to food banks, which offer valuable crisis support, but do not address the underlying drivers of food poverty. At the same time, central government has been at best confused about, at worst positively neglectful of, the reality of the acute demand for affordable food. What is needed is a strategic, centralised commitment to assisting long-term support for those in food poverty. A recent, government-commissioned review found that government-backed food initiatives tend to be more successful than community-based ones. In December 2012, in response to a question about food banks posed during Prime Minister's Questions, David Cameron described them as 'part of what I call the Big Society'. The prime minister has since distanced himself from this position, in the face of criticism. But the fact remains – food banks typify the sort of community and volunteer-led response that the Coalition Government pledged to support when it came to power.

The Government should create and publicise a 'conversion fund' for food banks willing to make the transition to providing longer-term forms of affordable food initiative

Policy makers should recognise the rich assets of existing food bank infrastructure – volunteer and donor networks, reach, and well-established trust within communities – and support the full and sustainable use of these assets. Under this scheme, food banks would be able to apply for a grant to set up a community supermarket or similar scheme. On the model of the 'Community Right to Challenge' (part of the Localism Act 2011), applicants might be required to demonstrate that they met certain criteria – for example, that they answered unmet need locally, and had a viable business plan. The Government should also consider incorporating non-financial support into the grant for successful bidders – for example, helping providers to access social investment, or linking them in to local businesses for practical support.

Accompanying the fund, the Government and Locality should set a specific target to reduce the number of food banks by 50 per cent by 2020, while serving at least the same number of people on low incomes who currently access existing food banks, through existing food banks and alternative forms of affordable food provision combined

Research by Oxfam and the Trussell Trust indicates that 40–50 per cent of people accessing food banks do so as a temporary, crisis measure. Food banks are indeed likely to remain the most effective form of crisis support for this group. The remaining 50–60 per cent, who are in ‘chronic’ food poverty, are the intended beneficiaries of the sustainable affordable food schemes described in this report. These figures should form the basis of a target to grow sustainable affordable food schemes. A better understanding of the scale and nature of food poverty is sorely needed, but all the existing evidence implies that the number of people currently accessing food banks is an *under-representation* – not, as is often asserted, an *over-representation* – of the true scale of demand. Therefore, with the drivers of food poverty set to worsen, we should be planning to serve *at least* as many beneficiaries as currently.

Sharing knowledge

The Government should appoint a national food security champion

In this, we echo the recent recommendation made by the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.⁵⁹ At present, the UK has a ‘global food security champion’, but no equivalent post for the UK’s food security specifically. While the challenges for the UK are not on a par with those faced by countries in Central Africa and Central Asia, it is nonetheless short-sighted not to treat them as part of the same continuum. After all, the factors driving up food prices, and the cost of living generally, have their origins outside the UK, in global issues, and this will continue to be the case over the coming decades as natural resources grow scarcer. Likewise, the UK should not overlook the potential application of ‘reverse innovation’ – the adoption in

developed countries of social innovations (most often in technology and healthcare) originally designed to address problems in developing countries – to household food insecurity in the UK. A national food security champion should work closely with the existing, global champion, and should have responsibility for coordinating research and facilitating sharing of best practice, including internationally.

Health and wellbeing boards should take a coordinating role in collecting and publishing information on food poverty in a local area, and sharing it with current and potential providers of affordable food

To work effectively, and avoid the risks of duplication, poor targeting, and/or creating demand, providers of affordable food need access to data about the scale and nature of demand among their intended beneficiaries. For the sustainable, longer-term forms of food initiative we are proposing, this necessity is greater still; it is key to potential providers' ability to construct a viable business plan and, since we argue for government funding of such initiatives, financial accountability is paramount.

A range of agencies routinely collect data that can contribute to a picture of food poverty. GPs and others making statutory food bank referrals are a starting point, but a number of sources can provide a richer picture: GPs and hospital staff noting cases of malnutrition, those running breakfast clubs at schools, managers of applications for crisis loans and advisers of those seeking advice for payday loan debts. HWBs should lead the collection, coordination and publication of these data, and ensure they are used by providers. There should be a statutory duty for public bodies to pass data to HWBs, which should work proactively with private and third sector partners to gather data from them. This might be best achieved by appointing a designated 'link worker' within each HWB for organisations responding to food poverty – a recommendation from the Greater London Authority's 2013 investigation into this issue.⁶⁰

Strengthening the business link

BIS and DEFRA should work with retail umbrella bodies (e.g. the British Retail Consortium) to identify and remove superfluous legislation and regulations that hinder cooperation between commercial retailers and the third sector

As we saw in chapter 3, not all community supermarket models source the food they sell from retail surplus, but many do – and there is scope for such redistribution to be explored further in the UK. The rise of food banks has given an expanding role to operations like the charity FareShare, which redistributes retail surplus to charities. Commercial retailers Demos consulted for this project highlighted legislation (closely followed by logistics) as the chief barrier to effective redistribution. According to the terms of the Food Safety Act 1990, responsibility for the safety of food remains with the retailer even after redistribution. The effect of this is that the risks to retailers of donating surplus food too often outweigh the benefits. Government should consult retail umbrella bodies and stakeholders such as FareShare and Trussell Trust to address this.

The landfill tax on retailers should be ploughed back directly into the conversion fund

Retailers currently have to pay a tax according to the volume of (food and non-food) waste they send to landfill. This acts as an incentive to reduce waste overall – both further up the supply chain (e.g. by reducing packaging) and later on (e.g. by recycling). The income levied from this tax should be used to bolster the conversion fund (see recommendation above) and increase the number of outlets taking surplus food. If possible, this measure should be implemented at a matched, local level, so that in areas where retailers send more waste to landfill they contribute proportionally more money to sustainable, affordable food schemes.

Redistribution of surplus food should be made the most financially attractive option for retailers.

Redistribution of surplus food may not be the cheapest alternative. One of the most popular means of recycling surplus food is sending it to be converted to renewable energy, particularly through anaerobic digestion. One major supermarket, which sends zero waste to landfill, has achieved this entirely through anaerobic digestion and other waste from energy processes. Redistribution, on the other hand, in addition to the risks discussed previously, is associated with costs in terms of staff time, training, potentially transportation, and so on. Recognising that redistribution – and particularly establishing a system of redistribution – may be a burden on retailers, incentives should take the form of ‘carrot’, rather than ‘stick’. In other words, the aim should not be achieved by making all other options more expensive; if necessary, it could involve government subsidising food redistribution (e.g. by funding schemes such as FareShare). A possible source of funding is the former subsidies for anaerobic digestion, which were scheduled for reduction or removal during in 2015.

Appendix: Distinguishing features of different community food models

Appendix

	What?	Who?
Buying club	<p>Overview, prevalence, sourcing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Most common model in US and Canada · Not for profit · Food sourced from wholesalers, sometimes specialising (esp in US) in wholesale and organic food · Premises required primarily for sorting goods and for collection by customers · May be run remotely 	<p>Membership, eligibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Membership schemes, sometimes cooperatives · Membership is usually open to all
	<p>Box or bag scheme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Prevalent in UK · Not for profit (or social enterprise) · Food sourced from (groups of) local farmers or producers · Premises required primarily for sorting goods and for collection by customers · May be run remotely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Open to all – may be run as cooperatives or social enterprises
Food co-op	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Most common type of scheme across all countries and most widespread globally · Mainly not for profit · Food sourced from (small) local producers and wholesalers, esp of specialist wholefood, organic or ethical produce · Physical premises – either dedicated or shared 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Membership schemes – cooperative model · Membership generally open to all · Membership fee and equity 'share' (US and Canada), or token membership fee (UK)
	<p>Excess stock</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Most popular model across Europe; increased popularity post-recession · Mainly not for profit · Food sourced from supply chain excess and/or unsellable goods (from producers, wholesale, or retail); may use an intermediary distributor e.g. Company Shop, FareShare · Physical premises – usually shared 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Not usually membership schemes · Usually have specific eligibility criteria (e.g. statutory referral; below a set income threshold); often strictly monitored · Restrictions may apply to size of spend and frequency or duration of access

How?	Why?	What else?
Staffing, funding	Aims	Added value
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often require few staff • Volunteering common, but not usually a requirement of membership • Usually financially self-sufficient (prices and small admin fees cover costs), occasional statutory or charitable grant support with start-up costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved access to quality, healthy and ethically sourced food • Affordability • Environmental benefits • Empowerment and self-determination as consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity for co-location (e.g. for collection of food) • Community kitchens • Food-related courses • Associated gardens, allotments and farms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers only or paid manager and volunteers; no volunteering requirements on members • Usually financially self-sufficient (prices or small admin fees cover costs); occasional statutory or charitable grant support with start-up costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordability • Quality • Organic food • Sustainability and resilience • 'Reconnecting' producers and consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signposting (e.g. including leaflets with goods) • Employment or training for staff or volunteers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffed by volunteers only or paid manager and volunteers • Volunteers are often members – may be requirement of membership (esp US and Canada) • Usually financially self-sufficient – costs covered by membership fees, members' investments (US and Canada) and/or a small markup • May receive additional funding from grants and donations (UK – local grant makers and NHS funding) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy food • High quality food • Affordable or fair prices • Ethical, sustainable and responsible – often organic or Fairtrade products • Waste reduction • Cooperation, social and economic development and community participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-location with range of support services • Education and training opportunities • Information about food, cooking, etc • Allotments, market gardens • 'Outreach' stalls
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually staffed by volunteers only or paid manager and volunteers • More often dependent on external (usually charitable) fundraising and corporate sponsorship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alleviation of poverty • Promote autonomy, dignity and choice • Sometimes explicitly temporary or crisis support • Affordability • Local sourcing • Waste reduction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-location with range of support services • Hot meals or café • Actively promote social contact

Notes

- 1 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger and Food Poverty, *Feeding Britain: A strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom*, London: The Children's Society, 2014, <https://foodpovertyinquiry.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/food-poverty-feeding-britain-final.pdf> (accessed 16 Jan 2015).
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Food banks have become a barometer for the debate about poverty in the UK. While few expect the need for emergency food aid to disappear any time soon, questions remain about the cause of that need, and whose responsibility it is to address it. Britain's food banks are doing an admirable job of supporting people in crisis, but the majority who use them are in 'chronic' food poverty. There is growing recognition that a more sustainable solution is needed – one which addresses the underlying causes of food poverty, and helps to restore to whole communities a degree of control over food security.

British Aisles presents the findings of a scoping exercise of some 45 models of more sustainable 'community supermarket' across the UK, the rest of Europe, Australia, Canada and the US. It examines their operating models, including aims, eligibility, staffing, funding and how food is sourced, and considers their applicability to the UK.

The report recommends an ambitious target for the government to halve the number of food banks by 2020, instead furnishing support for existing providers to launch community supermarkets, offering more sustainable, long-term help to lift people permanently out of food poverty. It also outlines a framework to promote greater collaboration between businesses and community supermarkets.

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