

<b>Title of Report:</b>	<b>Social Supermarket Support Fund</b>
<b>Committee Report Submitted To:</b>	The Leisure & Development Committee
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	21 February 2023
<b>For Decision or For Information</b>	For Decision

<b>Linkage to Council Strategy (2021-25)</b>	
Strategic Theme	Healthy, Active & Engaged Communities
Outcome	The Borough comprises cohesive and stable communities which work collaboratively with a range of stakeholders to address issues and deliver on opportunities
Lead Officer	Head of Community & Culture Community Development Manager

<b>Budgetary Considerations</b>	
Cost of Proposal	£0 net cost to Council
Included in Current Year Estimates	<b>YES/NO</b>
Capital/Revenue	Revenue
Code	33201
Staffing Costs	n/a

<b>Screening Requirements</b>	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	<u>Yes/No</u>	Date:
	EQIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	<u>Yes/No</u>	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:

## **1.0 Purpose of Report**

**The purpose of this report is to provide an update for Elected Members on Social Supermarket Support Fund monies received from Department for Communities (DfC); to note a Scoping Study undertaken by Ulster University; and to approve spend of the remainder of the Social Supermarket Support Fund monies for 2022-23.**

## **2.0 Background**

In September 2022, the Committee received a report on Social Supermarket Support Fund monies received from the Department for Communities (DfC)

DfC has operated a Social Supermarket (SSM) Pilot Programme since October 2017, where it has directly funded 5 pilot social supermarkets, one of which is in Causeway Coast and Glens, operated by Vineyard Compassion in Coleraine.

The aim of the social supermarket model is to offer a longer term and sustainable response to food insecurity by seeking to help address the root causes of poverty through wrap around support rather than the short term crisis food provision that foodbanks provide.

Social Supermarkets provide members, who are struggling financially and meet certain criteria, with the opportunity to shop in a reduced cost food shop for a set period of time (usually 3- 6 months) alongside engaging in wraparound support including advice on debt, benefits, budgeting, healthy eating, housing, physical and mental health referral, and education, training and volunteering opportunities to enhance employability skills. It is a membership programme where members pay a weekly membership subscription to shop for a variety of fresh, frozen & store cupboard food products.

Following positive evaluation of the Social Supermarket Pilot Programme the Minister approved an approach which would expand the concept to all Council areas using a co-design process to develop tailored models that best meets the needs of local communities and builds on the existing structures and partnerships. There is a second social supermarket operating in Causeway Coast and Glens, operated by Limavady Community Development Initiative (LCDI) which does not receive DfC funding.

## **3.0 Current Position**

Funding from the Department's 2022/23 Welfare Reform budget was provided through a Social Supermarket Support Fund (SSMSF) to Councils to support the co-design of a social supermarket model in the Council area. The amount awarded to Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council was £33,354.50. The Memorandum of Understanding for the 2022-23 SSMSF states that 'the objective of this funds is to support the co-design of a social supermarket model in the council area to completion and implementation. This can include support for the co-design process, capacity building for future implementation and testing/piloting where appropriate.'

Council has been working with partners in the Anti-poverty Stakeholder Steering Group and other stakeholders to develop a model for building on the existing pilot and expanding the provision in Causeway Coast and Glens.

Using the DfC Social Supermarket Support Fund, Council procured the services of Ulster University to carry out a scoping exercise and facilitate a co-design process for extending the existing social supermarket provision in Causeway Coast and Glens.

The Scoping Study, undertaken by Ulster University is attached at **Annex A**.

### **3.1 Key Considerations**

The key issues highlighted in the report can be summarised as follows:

- Many people in Causeway Coast and Glens who need help are not accessing support from food banks or SSMS;

- There needs to be a balance struck between taking away the stigma without institutionalising the need;
- No one organisation has the optimal location, premises or staffing capacity (support workers) to meet the current need;
- Operating costs are concerning, with energy prices cited most often as a pressing issue;
- Challenges of service provision in terms of accessibility and transport for an expansive geography that includes large rural areas;
- The location of any SSM/food bank is a key consideration; it needs to be accessible and served by public transport but discreet enough to afford privacy to clients;
- While the food aid is important, the wraparound advice offered is at least equally as important as the original food aid;
- Face to face support that can offer the services with the required intensity is not achievable via remote/online delivery;
- No one SSM/food bank can reasonably deliver food and wraparound support in a face-to-face way with the appropriate level of intensity without a dilution effect;
- Do we widen food support to provide food access to the greatest number of people possible or do we narrow capacity to offer more comprehensive wraparound support?

### 3.2 Recommendations from the Study

Recommendations from the Study are as follows:

- i. Advocate for a cash-first approach to bolstering people's incomes through income maximisation through work that pays alongside a fit for purpose welfare system;
- ii. Investigate/pilot other models for low-cost food provision;
- iii. Foodbanks/ SSMs ask for financial donations and not food donations to empower clients to afford and choose their own food with dignity;
- iv. Both SSMs should be required to offer the accessibility to the prospective client base from both urban and rural environs. with sufficient flexibility to accommodate the individual needs of each client lighter/more in-depth tailored versions and the tapering or extension of programme support;
- v. Mobile food vans should be considered for particularly remote or difficult to access locations and locations poorly served by public transport routes;
- vi. Grant funding for community sector initiatives should be simplified, streamlined and standardised to avoid overly cumbersome administration;
- vii. Community initiatives' buildings to be zero rated for local rates in order to significantly reduce their operating costs through this cost-of-living crisis;
- viii. Awareness raising of fuel support initiatives should be undertaken;
- ix. Awareness raising of Government Help to Save initiatives should be undertaken;
- x. Advocate for wider policy solutions that are not within their gift to deliver.  
eg. a fit for purpose benefits system that maintains pace with inflation and retains the £20 uplift and other Welfare Mitigation, Right to Food legislation, cash-first approach, commitment to and promotion of the Real Living Wage,

extension of eligibility and (universal) provision of free school meals, healthy start vouchers, breakfast clubs, school holiday food provision and exploration of Universal Basic Income.

The Committee is asked to note the report and its recommendations. Officers will now continue to work with providers to determine what is feasible for Council and the Social Supermarkets to deliver with the resources available, both in the short and medium term.

In the meantime, there is an amount of £25,973 remaining from the Social Supermarket Support Fund in the current year, to be expended by the end March 2023.

In light of the considerations raised in the Study, it is recommended that this funding is allocated to Vineyard Compassion, as the DfC recognised provider through its funded pilot scheme, to work in partnership with the other social Supermarket provider, LCDI, in order to:

- i. Extend the reach of the existing DfC pilot (Vineyard) to accommodate members from a wider geographical area.
- ii. Extend the model provided by Limavady Social Supermarket by providing financial support for staff costs to lengthen the period of support provided to households and to increase the weekly offering of food, in particular fresh food, fruit and vegetables (36 households).
- iii. Contribute towards the increased operating costs of providing the vital service, particularly utilities costs such as electricity and heat.
- iv. Develop a partnership model between the 2 established social supermarkets to ensure a sustainable specialised service moving forward with a model for future service delivery that will maximise the reach across the Borough and address any barriers to accessing the service.

## **5.0 Recommendation**

Provide funding of £25,973 from the DfC Social Supermarket Support Fund to Vineyard Compassion, as the DfC recognised provider.

To work with the other Social Supermarket provider, LCDI as outlined within the report to both help sustain, develop and extend the reach of the Social Supermarket services within the Borough.

# **Scoping exercise in relation to expanding the Social Supermarket provision in Causeway Coast and Glens.**

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(Ulster University) and Beth Bell  
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Submitted 7<sup>th</sup> December 2022

## **Acknowledgements**

Sinéad and Beth would like to thank Louise Scullion and Jenni Archer from Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council for their support throughout this research project. Particular thanks are due to the survey respondents and interview and focus group participants for giving their time and opinions so freely.



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## Abbreviations

CAP = Christians Against Poverty

CCG = Causeway Coast and Glens

CVS = Community and voluntary sector

DfC = Department for Communities

ICESCR = International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

NI = Northern Ireland

SROI = Social Return On Investment

SSDSs = Social Super Discount Stores

SSM = Social supermarket

UK = United Kingdom

USA = United States of America

## **Executive summary**

**Food insecurity:** Food insecurity/poverty is the inability to afford or access food in sufficient quantities or the anxiety of being unable to do so in a socially acceptable way. Earlier research in CCG area (Furey *et al.*, 2016) found food insecurity to be an issue of concern for its citizens for whom the gross full-time median weekly wage was £448, 19% lower than the NI figure of £535 and where both relative (18%) and absolute poverty (16%) were higher than the average for NI (17% and 15% respectively). CCG has two social supermarkets (SSMs) and two food banks in its catchment although other support agencies also provide some food aid. The purpose of this scoping exercise was to develop the specification for a tailored SSM model that meets the need for Causeway Coast and Glens. This is important given the challenges of service provision in terms of accessibility and transport for an expansive geography that includes large rural areas.

**Food aid models:** Food banks have existed since 1967 in the USA (1984 in Europe) and the first SSM was introduced in 1990 in Austria. Internationally, food aid organisations offer food and wraparound support to start to address the underlying causes of (food) poverty. While there is some commonality in approach, different operating models exist. There are interesting developments around a SSM-type model where access is not limited to people at risk of poverty and either differential pricing policies are applied to people on different incomes, more nutritional products have greater discounts applied to them than their less nutritious counterparts, or the general population is encouraged to shop there for environmental reasons to reduce the amount of edible food going to landfill. Unfortunately, despite the existence of food aid organisations, food insecurity continues to increase.

**CCG primary research findings:** CCG data suggest that many people who need help (as identified from the other answers) are not accessing support from food banks or SSMs. The common causal factor for presenting at food banks/SSMs is reduced income. Security of food donations in the medium term is not concerning although should FareShare have to increase its tariff to community food members this would have implications for future stocking densities. Operating costs are more concerning with energy prices cited most often as a pressing issue while the evidence is clear that running costs and funding received are hugely supplemented by substantial voluntary hours. While the food aid is important, recipients also welcomed how food parcels freed up money to afford other essentials for living – notably electricity, gas, oil, petrol and debt repayments, while the social aspect of the friendly reception by volunteers and the subsequent advice offered were recognised to be at least equally as important as the original food aid. Education was considered key to breaking the cycle of poverty while early intervention and giving people responsibility for their own outcomes were upheld as important prerequisites of any successful intervention. All participants agreed that the system is broken and the underlying causes of food and financial insecurity must be identified and eradicated. There needs to be a balance struck between taking away the stigma without institutionalising the need. None want charitable food aid to be perpetuated as the default solution to poverty yet participants could not articulate an alternative to their existence when so many remain in need.



**Recommendations:** The research indicates that in the short term there is merit in raising awareness of the food aid and advisory support services available across the Borough, alongside increasing awareness of discounted surplus food that is available to all without confusing the environmental agenda as a solution to food insecurity. It is prudent to consider the necessary trade-off(s): do we widen food support to provide food access to the greatest number of people possible within operating limits or do we narrow capacity to offer more comprehensive wraparound support?

**Priority actions included:**

Addressing the underlying causes of (food) poverty: **introduce a cash-first approach to bolstering people's incomes** (through continued advocacy and campaigning for income maximisation through work that pays alongside a fit for purpose welfare system that provides an adequate safety net for those unable to work). Additionally, the community sector should ask for **financial donations and not food donations** so that any support in-kind may enable and empower clients to afford and choose their own food with dignity.

CCG could investigate/**pilot other models for low-cost food provision** (eg) Social Super Discount Stores, community food hubs, Apps etc. Councillors should encourage initiatives with local retailers to make healthy food more affordable.

The location of any SSM/food bank is a key consideration while more sustainable, long-term solutions are progressed. It needs to be accessible and served by public transport but discreet enough to afford privacy to clients. No one SSM/food bank can reasonably deliver food and wraparound support in a face-to-face way with the appropriate level of intensity without a dilution effect. The working relationships between **CCG's two SSMs are mutually supportive, and it is the recommendation of this research that any funding is contingent on both being required to offer the accessibility so needed by the prospective client base from both urban and rural environs**. Additionally, the programmes should be designed with sufficient flexibility to accommodate the individual needs of each client via more reactive / responsive/dynamic/lighter/more in-depth tailored versions – the tapering or extension of programme support should be made possible so that clients may progress at a pace sustainable to them.

Any grant funding for community sector initiatives should be **simplified, streamlined and standardised** so that their workers and volunteers may focus on the more impactful work without being distracted by overly cumbersome administration.

Explore if community initiatives' buildings can become **zero rated for local rates** in order to significantly reduce their operating costs through this cost-of-living crisis.

*Fuel support:* CCG should increase awareness raising of the DfC-funded **Fuel Scheme and other fuel support initiatives**.

*Lower-cost energy cooking equipment:* There is some support for the **provision of air fryers**. This may be particularly appropriate given the lower running costs of air fryers compared to conventional ovens.

*Help to Save:* CCG should **increase awareness of the Government scheme where the government match-funds individuals' savings** after three years.

*Longer-term considerations:* CCG Councillors can proactively **advocate for wider policy solutions** that are not within their gift to deliver, for example, a fit for purpose benefits system that maintains pace with inflation and retains the £20 uplift and other Welfare Mitigation, Right to Food legislation, cash-first approach, commitment to and promotion of the Real Living Wage, extension of eligibility and (universal) provision of free school meals, healthy start vouchers, breakfast clubs, school holiday food provision and exploration of Universal Basic Income.

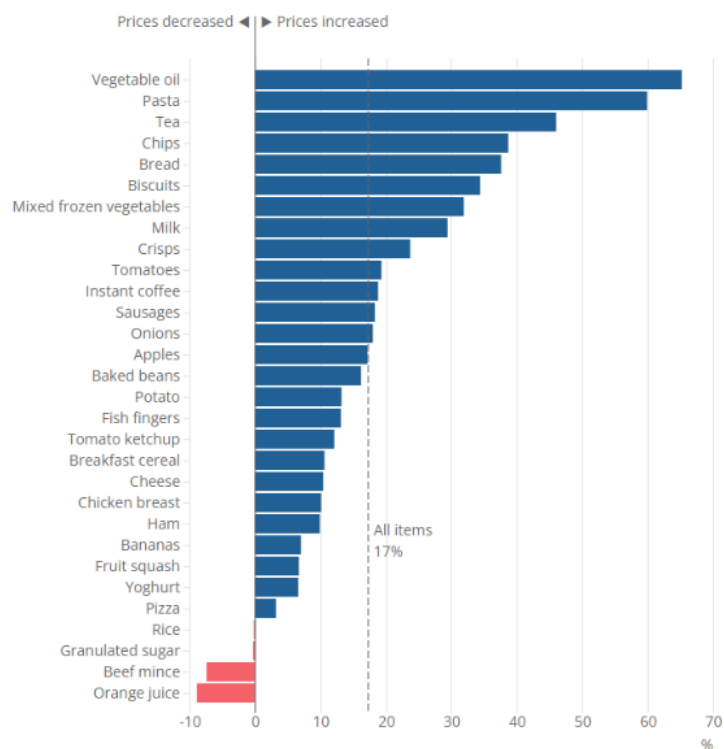
## Background and context to research question

Food insecurity (*the inability to afford or access food in sufficient quantities or the anxiety of being unable to do so in a socially acceptable way*) is a very real concern in this socio economic and geo-political climate: the rising cost of living, income crisis, withdrawal from the European Union and Russia Ukraine situation while continuing to emerge from the global Covid-19 pandemic have put additional pressure on the supply chain and increased food prices for householders.

According to the Office for National Statistics (2022), groceries that have increased in price in the last year include: vegetable oil by 65%; pasta by 60%; tea by 46%; chips by 39%; bread by 38%; and biscuits by 34%. ONS monitoring has reported the following foods to have increased in the past five months: vegetable oil by 46%; chips by 24%; and bread by 22%.

### There was a substantial range of price movement for the lowest prices

Lowest price of selected 30 everyday groceries, item-level price changes, September 2022 compared with September 2021



Publication: Tracking the price of the lowest-cost grocery items, UK, experimental analysis: April 2021 to September 2022

Office for National Statistics

Our previous [food poverty report](#) in Causeway Coast and Glens (CC&G) in 2015-16 found that food poverty had reached a concerning level within the Borough, with affordability and accessibility proving important points of concern for families already at risk of fuel poverty. Two in five (41%) respondents reported being unable to comfortably feed themselves and their families three meals per day all of the time, and three in ten (31%) reported being forced to make a choice between food and other essentials. More than half of the respondents (54%) reported some anxiety about whether their budget would fulfil their food needs.

Our former work with CC&G and Mid and East Antrim examined food bank service provisions with a view as to how existing good practices could be pragmatically re-developed as a method of alleviating household food insecurity for Northern Irish communities. It had four principal objectives: to identify the number of food banks in the area and services provided; to quantify the number of people accessing food banks and the quantity and type of meals provided; to ascertain how food pack contents may be enhanced to improve nutritional content; and to develop recommendations to improve existing food bank services.

There have been various interventions intended to reduce the prevalence of food insecurity across Northern Ireland and move away from the emergency response to a more sustainable, long-term response to food poverty, including the pilot of Social Supermarkets (SSMs) in five locations across the region. The aim of a social supermarket model is to offer a more long term and sustainable response to food insecurity by seeking to help address the root causes of poverty rather than simply provide food. This is achieved through the provision of wraparound support which includes, but is not limited to, advice on debt, benefits, budgeting, healthy eating, housing, physical and mental health referral, and education, training and volunteering opportunities to enhance employability skills. It is intended this will provide a long-term solution in a dignified manner rather than short term crisis provision.

In response to recommendations in the Welfare Reform Mitigations report the Department for Communities (DfC) has operated a SSM Pilot Programme since October 2017. Following positive evaluation, a co-design process with stakeholders has commenced to design how best to expand the model across all eleven Council areas. DfC in Northern Ireland is contributing financial resources to support the implementation of the models agreed by the co-design groups in each Council area. CCG is now seeking to expand the model in a co-designed way that is responsive to local communities' needs addressing both the underlying cause and the immediate need by maximising existing structures, services and partnerships to provide wraparound support services 'beyond food'.

DfC has provided some preparatory funding to Councils to commission technical assistance to undertake a scoping exercise and to develop the specification for a tailored SSM model that meets the need for Causeway Coast and Glens.

One of the five social supermarkets funded through the SSM Pilot Programme is the Reset Social Supermarket operated by Vineyard Compassion in Coleraine. There is a second social supermarket in CCG, operated by Limavady Community Development Initiative (LCDI) which is self-funded.

These two organisations, both of which also operate foodbanks, sit on a Borough-wide Anti-Poverty Steering Group, along with other established food banks and advice centres. The Steering Group also has representation from statutory bodies and other charities and voluntary organisations. The Anti-Poverty Steering Group has developed a detailed Action Plan to promote a co-ordinated approach to addressing the causes and consequences of poverty in Causeway Coast and Glens. The Anti-Poverty Action Plan is one of the strategic actions of the CCG Community Plan.

### **Research Aim**

The aims of the project are to:

- Carry out a scoping of the existing social supermarkets in CCG, in the context of the other services that tackle food poverty and poverty more generally;
- Provide a high-level assessment of need in the area;
- Consider if there are particular geographical areas, communities or household types within the district who are in particular need?
- Provide an overview of how a proposed model or models would operate in CCG. This should include, but not restricted to, consideration of the following:
  - a. Who will be eligible to access the support?
  - b. How people would access/be referred into the service and who would make the assessment of need?
  - c. How suitable wraparound for individuals would be identified and managed?
  - d. What services should be included in the wraparound? What could be included from the outset and what would need to be developed?
  - e. How can the service be accessible to as many people as possible with the Council area?
  - f. Numbers that could be supported? Could different approaches be taken for those requiring only short term support and those who may need longer term assistance?
  - g. How food stock will be sourced?
- Provide estimated annual costs to deliver the essential elements of the model, the desirable and the optimum?
- Consider and make recommendations on how success will be measured addressing the need identified and desired outcomes.

## **Socio-economic characteristics of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area citizens**

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council Corporate Strategy 2021-25 outlines that the Council area covers an area of 1,968 square kilometres, making it one of the largest Councils in NI in terms of land mass. The strategy notes that “*Whilst largely a rural borough, there are a number of established settlements within the area including Coleraine, Ballymoney and Limavady*”. This is significant when discussing the challenges of service provision in terms of accessibility and transport.

For the purposes of this research, the data are informed by the 2021 Census data, and figures from the Corporate Strategy.

To date, limited detailed information is available from the 2021 Census breakdown for Causeway Coast and Glens, with a second tranche of results to be released on 15 December 2022. A high level summary outlines the following demographic information for Causeway Coast and Glens:

- total population is 141,700, up 1% since 2011
- total households is 57,600, up 7% since 2011

The Corporate Strategy gives more specific demographic details in terms of age breakdown as follows:

- 19.6% children
- 61.9% representing the majority of the working age population (16-64)
- 18.4% aged 65 years and over

Both sources outline that the proportion of older people in the Borough has increased, with the Strategy noting additionally that there is a larger proportion of people aged 65 and over living in the Borough (18.4%) compared to the Northern Ireland average of (16.6%).

2018 figures would indicate that 70.7% of those aged 16-64 living in the Borough were economically active and 29.3% were economically inactive, compared with NI figures of 72.8% and 27.2% respectively. The employment rate was 66.8% against an NI rate of 70%, and 2019 figures show that the gross full-time median weekly wage in CCG was £448, 19% lower than the NI figure of £535.

In the current wider circumstance of economic challenge across NI, these figures would indicate particularly difficult circumstances for citizens of CCG Borough Council.

This is corroborated by data from the 2021 Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council Community Planning Data Analysis Baseline Update Report. This cites 2019 figures detailing the proportion of the population of CCG that are currently living in absolute or relative poverty and outlines that the proportions for both relative (18%) and absolute poverty (16%) were higher than the average for NI (17% and 15% respectively).

## **Literature review**

Too many people in Northern Ireland are experiencing, or are at risk of, food insecurity – the inability to access sufficient affordable food in a socially acceptable way. The Food Standards Agency’s [report](#) (January 2022) found that one in six (16%) in Northern Ireland is experiencing food insecurity at some level (i.e.) low or very low food security. The FSA’s May 2022 [report](#) concluded a widespread sense that the food system is not working as well as it should for the UK public - particularly for those less financially secure with price often the principal driver of food choices, leading many to make uncomfortable compromises regarding health, environment, wider ethical values, and for some even around ‘basic’ considerations like safety or even sufficiency. A greater number of Northern Ireland consumers (22% compared to the UK average of 20%) spontaneously mentioned food prices as an area of future concern - well ahead of any other spontaneous mentions (FSA, May 2022). The corresponding figure for prompted concern was 80% in Northern Ireland (compared to the UK average of 76%) with a majority of people (74% in Northern Ireland vs. 65% UK average) having modified their food behaviours as a result of financial concerns. The most recent data (September 2022) from this twice-yearly research concluded that 40% of participants reported feeling worried about being able to afford food in the next month; 30% of participants reported that they had skipped a meal or cut down the size of their meals because they did not have enough money to buy food in the last month; 32% of participants reported that they had eaten food past its use-by date, at least once in the past month, because they couldn’t afford to buy more food; and 18% of participants turned off a fridge and/or freezer containing food, at least once in the last month, to reduce energy bills and save money.

Evidence from the community and voluntary sector (CVS) notes that lack of core funding, prevalence of short-term funding and greatly increased needs of communities over the last few years (as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis) means that many people within the CVS are, at best, working at the limits of their capacity, and - at worst - approaching burnout. Much of this is as a result of wider funding systems that mean staff may continually have to apply and reapply for project funding, often competing with other organisations meeting the same needs in communities, all of which contributes to capacity in the CVS being severely limited which may impact on their capacity.

### **The right to food**

Food is a basic right. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights everyone has a fundamental right to be free from hunger and have access to safe and nutritious food. The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child are both legally binding. Both explicitly name adequate food and housing as basic human rights. Article 11 of the ICESCR states that: *The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions*. More recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2015) call for an end to poverty in all its forms everywhere to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. No Poverty; Zero Hunger.

Human rights are indivisible: the denial of one right affects the enjoyment of others; hence, the intrinsic link between the basic rights to housing, food and health. Yet our

right to food continues to be compromised by poverty! The existence of food poverty should not fall to civil society to solve; the primary duty bearer must be Government through joined-up, purposive policy making across (local) government departments. It is entirely possible to address the rising gap between income and food prices by pursuing policy actions that maximise income and benefit realisation in a sustainable way. Addressing the structural causes of food poverty through economically, socially, and culturally fair and appropriate policy levers provides the greatest chance to address the gap between income and food costs, and lift our most vulnerable citizens out of food poverty. It bears repeating, the role of the state should be to protect these rights and to address the gap between income and food costs.

The former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food commented that the growth of food banks in wealthy countries is a salient marker of social policy failure (with respect to hunger) and failure of government to meet its right to food obligations (De Schutter, 2012). As Booth and Whelan (2014, pp.1400-01) state: "*Food banks in and of themselves are meritorious, but do little to solve long-term food poverty and hunger. However, they are uniquely placed to collaborate with government to take action on the structural issues which underpin hunger*". We wish to see an ethics-led approach to resolving food poverty. Current solutions such as food banks and SSMS cannot be withdrawn in the short term. It is therefore of vital importance that services are designed and delivered with an assets-based approach and concepts of dignity, choice and kindness robustly built-in from the outset so that we address the 'how' as well as the 'what' when seeking to support our citizens out of food poverty.

### **Food citizenship**

The design and delivery of this research has been guided by principles of food citizenship, which is a model that seeks to connect people with the power they have in the food system (of which emergency food aid provision is a part). Food citizenship challenges the common assumption that we are best understood as consumers, and demands instead that we are identified and empowered as citizens first and foremost. As food citizens, our role in our communities expands beyond what we can or can't afford to purchase, and recognises our essential worth as human beings, regardless of our economic contribution. In these challenging times for both citizens and the organisations, it is crucial that these principles are embedded into emergency food aid approaches.

### **Background to food banks**

Prior to 2002/2001, any use of the term food bank would have been succeeded with a definition explaining its purpose. Since 2000-01, food banks have proliferated in the UK. In Northern Ireland, we had one food bank in 2008, 13 in 2013 (Advice NI, 2013) and we now have 41 Trussell Trust food banks in the region alongside a small number of non-affiliated and/or independent food banks. Food banks are defined as "*community-centred warehouses that solicit food, store food obtained from local producers, retail food sources, federal commodity distribution programs, and the food industry, and distribute it to charity institutions*" (Penco *et al.*, 2021, p.1876). They are considered to be mutually beneficial for all parties: reducing waste management and disposal costs for the private food sector (Baglioni *et al.*, 2017; Michelini *et al.*, 2018; Principato *et al.*, 2020; Tarasuk *et al.*, 2014); supporting charity organisations to accomplish their social goal (Penco *et al.*, 2021); and guaranteeing food access to those in need in society as a whole (Midgley, 2014).



In the United States, the first food bank was established in 1967. In Europe, the first food bank was founded in France in 1984. The German food bank (founded in 1993) consists of local food pantries that distribute food to beneficiaries who are registered on the German welfare system and characterised as financially deprived. Recipients have access to additional services such as breakfast for school children, distribution of second-hand clothing, and support with medical appointments, banking and personal administrative tasks. Each client receives about 3.5 kg of food per week either provided free of charge or upon payment of a symbolic fee. The value amounts to about eight Euros per capita (Rombach *et al.*, 2018). In Italy, the food bank was established in 1989 also requires beneficiaries to present proof of neediness and provides extra services that allow food bank beneficiaries to interact with each other. This social inclusion aspect is considered particularly as important as receiving food in Italy (Rombach *et al.*, 2018).

The first Australian food bank opened in 1992 and by 1993 the development and growth of food banks had already been likened to a successful business (Whale, 1993). They are funded by trust, private and corporate donations and member agencies pay a small handling fee per kilo of food to food banks. Australian food banks source food in three main ways: (1) donation from producers, wholesalers and retailers; (2) buying food direct from manufacturers at cost price; and (3) the Collaborative Supply Program, an initiative that allows food banks to select and secure sustainable supplies of popular basic foods at a minimal cost compared to estimated retail value (Booth and Whelan, 2014).

A further consideration is the necessity for food banks (and SSMs) to both feed people with the donated food while striving to guarantee balanced nutritional contents. This is made more difficult when food banks are not in control of supply (or demand!) and cannot easily determine the quality, type and quantities of the foodstuff they will receive; so, how can they provide nutritional content if they cannot control food donations? (Santini, 2014). It is noteworthy that academic research (Power *et al.*, 2021) has found a strong negative association between having used a food bank and frequency of fruit and vegetable consumption meaning that the more likely you are to be reliant on a food bank, the fewer portions of fruits and vegetables that are typically consumed and a strong relationship between having used a food bank and eating more processed food consumption. The same study reported maternal buffering (mothers going without healthier foods so that their children may eat a more nutritious diet). Power *et al.* (2021) also differentiated between informal food aid (community cafes) and food banks, with focus group participants in their study reporting more positive experiences of informal food aid. It has been reported elsewhere (Pfeiffer *et al.*, 2011; Lorenz, 2012a, b; Selke 2012; Riches and Silvasti, 2014; Baglioni *et al.*, 2016) that many food bank users perceive visits to the food bank as 'shameful'.

The term 'food pantry' originated in the USA but in the UK, members of a food pantry usually pay a weekly fee of around £3.50 to access around £15-25 worth of food made up of surplus and donations.

**The Food Bank Plus Model:** The food bank plus model redistributes, free of charge, food surplus that would otherwise be wasted; as well as providing the additional

support services such as debt management and upskilling that would help break the cycle of poverty.

### **Background to social supermarkets**

An early mention of 'social supermarket' was made in 1973 when the social security academic Veldkamp (1973, p.368) hypothesised that *"it might be desirable to set up a kind of social supermarket by analogy with the ordinary shopping supermarket| whereby the latter "offers the consumer an opportunity to do all his shopping under one roof, similar facilities should be provided for those with business to transact in the social services and administrative fields"*. Veldkamp (1973, pp.368-9) went on to *"visualise the social supermarkets as a community centre ... where people can go with their human worries"*.

Redistribution of surplus food for charitable purposes is an established practice in European retailing, encouraged in part by the Food Waste Hierarchy where ideally, surplus food should, as a priority, be redistributed for people to eat (with Plan B being that it is used in animal feed production or for bio-material processing). For example, retail stores above a certain size ( $\geq 400\text{m}^2$ ) are required to provide surplus food to educational or charitable institutions in France (Rombach and Bitsch, 2015). However, in the UK, regulations impede redistribution since retailers fear litigation (Midgley, 2014; Gruber *et al.*, 2016) but research (Beckmann *et al.*, 2021: 2) has recommended that the UK government *"adopts legislation that establishes clear belland comprehensive liability protections for food donors and food recovery organizations that act in good faith in order to ensure concern for liability arising out of donating food does not deter potential donors"*. Good Samaritan legislation limits liability for those providing emergency aid to another on a voluntary basis i.e. food donors. Such laws are already in place in Canada and the United States (Poppendieck, 2014; Tarasuk and Eakin, 2005). In 2016, Italy introduced similar legislation via a law known as 'Gadda Law'. In recognition of litigation fears, Germany, which encourages but does not require the redistribution of surplus food, the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture has advised that producers and retailers are liable for damages or the redistributor is liable where the producer or retailer cannot be identified. Therefore, when redistributing food to third parties, retailers are advised to emphasise that the products are close to the best-before-date.

The academic literature defines SSMs as an alternative food retail distribution model simultaneously aiming to reduce food waste while meeting the needs of low-income consumers. SSMs are somewhat like traditional supermarkets in that they primarily sell food and other consumer products while offering similar in-store services, particularly to lower-income communities, whose sales revenues ensure their continuing financial viability (Michelini *et al.*, 2018). SSMs are situated by some in the context of what they describe as *'austerity retail'*. This umbrella term is used to *"include initiatives with a retail approach that addresses people most affected by austerity"* (Saxena and Tornaghi, 2018). They further offer social or wraparound support, for example skills development, training, debt advice, cooking classes (Saxena and Tornaghi, 2018). The purpose of the wrap-around services is to address poverty causes: benefit checks; budgeting classes; debt advice; housing advice; value for money cooking/shopping classes. This is especially important in the context of the pressing challenge regarding the growing number of people who cannot reasonably survive on their current income and the growth of the working poor.

The main differences between SSMs and traditional supermarkets are threefold. SSMs and supermarkets differ by reason of the smaller floor size of SSMs and the more limited product variety offered by the former whose still consumable merchandise is a surplus product given for free by food producers, processors and retailers because they are considered no longer saleable due to being too close to an expiration date, wrongly labelled, excess stock, deemed aesthetically unacceptable (e.g. blemished fruit and vegetables) or bearing slightly damaged packaging. A second difference is the intended audience: SSMs are aimed at people in poverty or living at risk of poverty. A third difference is SSMs' subsidised prices of up to 50-70% off the regular retail price (Holweg *et al.*, 2010) or goods may be given away for free (Holweg and Lienbacher, 2016). They are run typically by the charitable sector or by a commercial organisation or an entrepreneur (Sadílek, 2021), and they can be either open to the general public, which has the benefit of being less stigmatising, or restricted to eligible customers – perhaps lower-income consumers who are deemed at risk of poverty (Bech-Larsen *et al.*, 2019).

The SSM concept originated in Austria in 1990 (Lienbacher *et al.*, 2021). All social supermarkets have a membership card, and entry is based on Austria's official poverty level (less than 60% of the median household income); as well as through other potential indicators such as household composition. Membership is reassessed periodically to prevent reliance on the service, as well as unnecessary use of the service (Fusions, 2015). The German SSM model is a mix of the traditional SSM; a counter-based service; and a mobile distribution service for those with accessibility issues, with a similar eligibility criteria as Austria (Die Tafeln, 2016). In Spain, members are given identification cards with one notable exception of a SSM that allows access by non-member customers paying the prices of a conventional store to help finance the enterprise. Another difference was the degree of subsidy by product category (i.e.) foods considered to be basic from a nutritional point of view received a greater discount while full price was payable on other foods (de Renobales *et al.*, 2015). Sweden similarly sees merit in SSMs as '*more empowering*' with a two tier system in practice whereby anyone can shop at their SSMs but only registered members, who must book a slot to shop, get the lowest prices (Henley, 2022).

In the United Kingdom (UK), the first SSM opened in 2013 under the banner of Community Shop, and currently has four sales outlets. The USA augmented the model in 2015 with Daily Table, a new kind of retail grocery store that offers fresh produce and grocery items as well as ready-to-cook and grab-and-go prepared meals at affordable prices (Michellini *et al.*, 2018).

The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry in Hunger in the UK (2014) lauded SSMs as offering low income families a "*hand up*" as opposed to a "*hand out*". The support also helps them manage their debts, as well as offering other forms of budgeting support and employment/skills advice.

The major challenges of SSMs relate to logistics and distribution involving timely information sharing among partners, receipt of (adequate) surplus products, and prompt distribution to SSMs.

A concern is noted by some about the nutritional quality of the food available as a whole: "*Is the easy availability of significantly discounted food, especially tinned,*

*processed or ready foods, and the lack of fresh produce in many cases, making it harder for some members/customers to choose healthier options? This raises a further question whether SSMs are not only serving to reproduce the dualism of good-food-to-wealthy and other-food-to-the-poor, but also disabling healthy food practices” (Saxena and Tornaghi, 2018).*

### **SSMs’ Pilot in Northern Ireland**

DfC commenced its SSM conversation in 2016 as there was concern around the quality/nutritional value of food bank food parcels in the past. Food banks had limited wrap-around services originally with no attempt to address the causes of poverty or food waste and issues regarding the quality of food. DfC piloted, in 2017, five SSMs across the region in Belfast, Coleraine, Derry-Londonderry, Lisburn and Strabane. These SSMs were supplied with redistributed surplus food from FareShare with fresh fruit and vegetables, chilled/frozen meats to augment food provision and offered wrap-around services of healthy eating and cooking on a budget classes and other services as a condition of membership to their clients. SSM membership is on a six-month basis. CCG has two SSMs in its catchment – one of which (*Vineyard Compassion’s RESET*) was involved in the DfC pilot.

#### *Evaluation*

The SSM pilot, in operation between October 2017 and March 2020, was evaluated by DfC in March 2020. The evaluation outlined that across the five pilots, 1,119 members accessed a SSM, with a further 2,797 people benefiting from the provision based on a mean household size of 2.5. Over 148 tonnes of food surplus was directed to the pilots, of which 108.3 tonnes came from FareShare (themselves supported by DfC). A key component beyond food was fuel poverty support from Bryson Energy (funded by DfC) which engaged 527 members across the five SSMs, with access to the Free Oil Incentive, energy grants, switching advice and access to the Oil Buying Club scheme.

For members, access to the SSMs came with the condition of engaging with ‘wrap-around’ support, with the main uptake being support around healthy eating, benefits advice, family budgeting, fuel poverty, training/employability skills and debt counselling. These services were delivered by 30-40 external partners operating alongside SSM staff.

Overall, the evaluation identified that there is good evidence that members and their households who are most in need and at risk of (food) poverty were supported, consistent with membership criteria for access. In summary, the vast majority of members surveyed were in receipt of at least one benefit, with a significant majority being from lone parent households. Noting that 62% were unemployed with a further 17% economically inactive, the members were most likely to be affected by benefit changes being introduced across Northern Ireland. Lastly, it was identified that a significant proportion of members lived in locations that are amongst the most deprived in Northern Ireland.

Regarding the provision of food, the evaluation notes that SSMs are improving access to healthy food produce with 96% of members rating the range and quality of stock as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’. In part, this is made possible by four out of the five having access to allotments to enhance the supply of fruit and vegetables, which supplements the food from FareShare and other food partnerships.

Almost all (98%) members believed that the fee to access the SSMs was affordable whilst 98% strongly agreed or agreed that the SSM mechanism is respectful of people's dignity and freedom. Retention figures would suggest that between 15% and 32% of people did not complete their membership.

In outlining the volunteer hours across the pilots (more than 18,000 which equates to £165k in value terms using the national living wage benchmark), the evaluation makes clear that the "modest" investment from DfC of £60k-70k pa is highly supplemented by volunteer hours. This is important to note.

In evaluating whether anyone is better off, the research included questions probing whether membership of the SSM has had an impact on improved quality of life through a reduction in food insecurity, improved self-efficacy and locus of control and overall improved life satisfaction. In all cases the evaluation found that the SSMs impacted positively on their members' wellbeing and life satisfaction: *'There is evidence...of the strong empowering influence from the holistic nature of the SSM supports and the manner in which they are delivered'*.

However, while the measure looking at improved awareness of and attitudes towards healthy eating does show a positive impact, it is less pronounced than the other areas. For example, the indicator which states *'1/members of my household would have a good understanding of healthy eating practices (e.g. not skipping breakfast, 5 a day guidelines, avoiding high fat and high sugar snacks and controlling salt intake)'* the reduction in the results between entry and exit interviews is only 7%.

The efficacy of the wrap-around support is noted as positive with over 90% of members stating that the SSM membership helped them to identify barriers to overcoming their present situation and identify actions and solutions to overcome these.

Overall, the evaluation notes that the SSMs' role in combining access to affordable food produce and wrap-around supports is helping to positively change the life circumstances of members (and their families) and *"at a minimum it has given members the confidence to embark on a path to transition out of food poverty"*.

The evaluation concludes with statements around wider community benefits including that the DfC support was used to reanimate space that was previously less used or vacant stating that *"all five have achieved high quality facilities with modest levels of capital investment"*. A high proportion of members agreed that the facilities were of a high quality, and further that they helped to reanimate their local community.

### **Other models from the (international) literature**

*France:* 'Social and solidarity stores' were established in France in the 1980s as local convenience stores where people with low income can buy everyday goods for about 10% or 20% of their regular retailing price so that people with low income but who were reluctant to benefit from charity could afford to buy food in 'normal' supermarkets. The stores are supported by an ANDES Network which purchases food in larger quantities which can be sold onwards at a cheaper price, resulting in less overall purchases, enabled by a policy requiring French supermarkets greater than 400m<sup>2</sup> to sign a contract stating that surplus food, in a state which is fit for use, will be donated to charities. If supermarkets have not signed a contract they will face criminal charges (Euro Food Law, 2016). The retailing activity is only one element -

they also offer other programmes to help people realise their own competences and value. The programmes are intended to last between two and 12 months depending on people's situations.

*Czechia:* In Czechia there is a further evolution of the SSMs into Social Super Discount Stores (SSDSs) where the access is not limited to people at risk of poverty but also welcomes any member of the public interested to purchase food products approaching their published shelf-life at an affordable price and therefore reduce potential food wasting. Neither is access controlled: SSDSs do not require any membership for their consumers. SSDSs do not offer any ancillary support services that would help their customers improve their financial, lifeskills or employment situations. The primary purpose of the SSDS is to efficiently redistribute surplus food from food producers and retail chains without generating any kind of financial or non-financial loss, making them more sustainable than SSMs and food banks in the long term: generating profit is not the main business goal. If existing SSDS chains in Czechia were to organise themselves under one umbrella association this would increase its negotiation power with its suppliers (food producers and retail chains). SSDSs are typically located in smaller towns, as limited liability companies offering beverages, dairy, tins and packets, and sweets, frozen vegetables, meat and poultry, with some bread and bakery goods but not fresh fruit and vegetables, perhaps due to the difficulties of acquiring fresh produce from the suppliers and also difficulties complying with the demanding and complicated hygiene standards required by food safety authorities. Some operate with central warehouses for their stores with a website presence, social media and leaflet distribution representing their main marketing activity (Sadílek, 2021).

**Company Shop/Community Shop Network, GB:** Company Shop is a Community Interest Company set up over 40 years ago, which is now the UK's largest redistributor of surplus products. It redistributes surplus through a national network of staff shops, standalone stores (franchises) and 'click and collect' services, providing offers to members who work in the food manufacturing industry and emergency services.

Community Shop was set up in 2013 in areas of deprivation, and is organised by Company Shop in collaboration with local councils responsible for identifying areas of need through postcode-based means tested access criteria. Company Shop then provides the necessary support to the council to set up a Community Shop in premises subsidised by the council. Community Shops provide surplus food from Asda, Morrisons, Marks & Spencer, Tesco and Ocado at a reduced price of 30%, as well as support through its collaboration with Citizens' Advice, which consists of debt advice, upskilling, and curriculum vitae advice (Community Shop, 2016).

**Plunkett Foundation:** The Plunkett Foundation aims to support community shops in rural areas where the shops are member-funded and member-run, with the local community electing their committee. They are usually the only shop within a four-mile radius in a small community. The Foundation charges a fee for initial set-up and a yearly membership fee. Currently there is one Plunkett Foundation Co-op in Northern Ireland, which is based on Rathlin Island (Co-operative Alternatives, 2016).

## **Your Local Pantry**

Managed by Church Action on Poverty as a social franchise in partnership with Stockport Homes, the Pantry model is an effective way to make sure that people's budgets go further by offering fresh food to households that would otherwise be limited to cheap, less nutritious food. The requirements for membership are minimal and continued membership is not seen as a problem (i.e.) you can join for as long as you want, and can choose to go every week or just occasionally. Members pay a small subscription of a few pounds a week, and in return can choose groceries worth many times more, often saving £650+ a year on shopping bills (Purcell and Maynard, 2018).

In summary the benefits are: strengthen communities; improve health and wellbeing; improve household finances; prevent waste; prevent hunger; build dignity and agency; and reduce social isolation. The social return on investment has been valued at 6:1 meaning every £1 invested in the pantry model equates to £6 of social value to the community (Purcell and Maynard. 2018).

This model has been replicated in Northern Ireland in *Freedom Pantry* in Lurgan. It is open to all and without referral meaning that anyone who lives in an area served by a Pantry can join and enjoy the choice of quality food including fresh fruit and vegetables, frozen and chilled food, meat and dairy products, and long-life tinned and packaged food. The Pantry acts as a neighbourhood hub with the potential to accommodate other projects and initiatives (e.g.) cookery classes, volunteering opportunities, and training.

A food pantry has just opened in the Ashton centre in North Belfast. A third Northern Ireland pantry is in development in Kilcooley.

### **Community Fridges**

The community fridge model aims to repurpose surplus food as a way to connect and feed communities, rescuing this food, free of charge, from supermarkets, local retailers, producers, households and gardens. The core message is environmental i.e. it is less about individuals needing food; it is more commonly described as '*this food needs you*'.

Community fridges tend to be managed by a community organisation, and differ from food banks in a number of ways. Given the purpose of diverting surplus food from becoming waste food, usage of community fridges is open to anyone in the community. Referrals are not required. Likewise there is no limitation on the number of visits an individual can make in a period of time. As such, anecdotally there is less stigma attached to accessing a community fridge.

Our assessment would be that community fridges are one of various progressive mechanisms for distributing surplus food to all, but they are not an appropriate mechanism for addressing food poverty due to the extremely unpredictable nature of the food supply. In many community fridges it is not known what and how much food will be donated day to day.

This is echoed by Hubbub who note:

*"Hubbub is an environmental charity and cutting food waste is one of our core objectives. We don't see the provision of surplus food as a long-term solution to food*

*poverty.”*

They go on to say, “*we recognise that for many the Community Fridge and access to free food may offer crucial support in difficult circumstances*”. This recognition of how community fridges can come to be relied upon by those in dire need should be considered alongside the unpredictability of the supply.

Most community fridges in the UK are part of Hubbub’s Community Fridge Network (270 in April 2022). Community fridges are not as widespread in NI as in other parts of the UK but local examples can be found including in Ballycastle, Magilligan, Bushmills, Dungiven and Cloughmills.

### **Opportunities for apps/digital platforms**

The environmental agenda and increasing digital capabilities has shone a light on the importance of new technologies in the fight against waste, using digital platforms to manage food and to eliminate the loss in surplus products by recognising that leftover food is a resource and not waste (Cane and Parra, 2020). Food-sharing mobile applications are becoming increasingly popular (Harvey *et al.*, 2019). They have different motivations: variously responsible consumption, food management and social contact. These platforms have proliferated mainly in cities such as Amsterdam, London, Barcelona, Milan and Singapore, all of them considered Smart Cities: a type of urban development based on sustainability that is able to adequately respond to the basic needs of institutions, businesses, and the inhabitants themselves, both economically and in operational, social and environmental aspect (Cane and Parra, 2020). Popular apps in Northern Ireland include Olio (which connects neighbours with each other and with local businesses to share surplus food) and Gander (which is a mobile platform that displays ‘reduced to clear’ food products by pushing the reduced food products to the mobile app, as they are stickered in-store).

### **Conflation of food insecurity and food waste**

These solutions may contribute to the societal expectation that use of surplus food is only for those experiencing hardship when in fact, as we are all part of the food system, we all have a responsibility as citizens to normalise use of surplus food within all communities whilst also bringing pressure on retailers to create less surplus, and campaigning for systemic changes in the food system that results in less food being wasted in the first place.

Waste food isn’t the answer to food poverty: the benefits of using food waste to feed people accrue primarily to the food industry whilst absolving responsibility of the government to address food insecurity and distracting from the systematic problem of food surplus and waste in the broader food chain. Notwithstanding this, we should be able to support a drive for excellence in the distribution of surplus food to meet people’s immediate need while striving in parallel to co-design and deliver a sustainable, long-term, effective, pragmatic and morally appropriate solution to eradicating food insecurity.

There is a growing movement aimed at framing SSMs, food banks and expiration date pricing practices, conventionally viewed as social actions aimed at alleviating poverty, as environmentally friendly initiatives to prevent food waste (Bech-Larsen *et al.* 2019). This reframing of the narrative may be considered a welcome development for commentators and practitioners (see for example, Caraher and Furey 2017,



Caraher and Furey, 2018; Independent Food Aid Network, 2022) who believe that food waste and food insecurity should not be conflated. The use of surplus, saleable food should not be viewed as the default solution for food poverty. To do so, may be viewed as serving “*leftover food to left behind people*” (Riches, 2018) which represents a two-tier approach to a rights-based food issue. If we focus on redistributing surplus food then this practice undermines calls for direct actions to be taken that simultaneously reduce the production of surplus food, address the wider policy issues contributing to food poverty, and ensure the right to food.

A further tension is noted about the normalising of SSMs, in particular that the prevalence of such ‘austerity retail’ can actually mask the problems that they are designed to address:

*“Whereas the vision is to reduce food waste, the SSM model relies on a regular and sustainable supply of food surplus which undercuts the prevention of food waste as a priority...Also, the ability of the SSM model to provide healthy nutritious food is variable and often limited. In many cases, enabling the easy availability of ‘cheap’ food (especially when it is highly processed and nutrient-deficient) and the impact on already existing health inequalities in vulnerable communities is not being questioned”* (Saxena and Tornaghi 2018).

An alternative approach to surplus food comes from the *Wefood* model in Denmark. Wefood, Denmark’s first surplus food supermarket, sells goods that regular supermarkets can no longer sell due to expired ‘best before’ dates, incorrect labels or damaged packaging. The products found in Wefood are still edible and safe to consume, and Wefood is very intentional in its messaging that it is for everyone. This idea, that food surplus can and should be used by everyone and is not just those experiencing hardship, is really important. There is therefore potential to replicate the Wefood model or normalise the selling of food/dishes made from food that would otherwise be wasted for the general consumption of *all*. This could be rolled out to the hospitality sector through food service social enterprises offering meals prepared from surplus food on a discretionary *Pay what you can afford / contribute what you can* basis.

## **Challenges**

Arising from the review of the literature, the following challenges in the implementation of SSMs and similar lower-cost food provision have been identified.

- Support of conventional commercial retailers for food supply
- Stability of food donations – managing consumer expectations and offering choice
- Financial sustainability
- Membership fees and duration of support – should the model be a stigma free supermarket which is accessible to all but offers differential pricing? Through their business models designed to benefit people, planet, (and profits), social businesses may potentially offer powerful, sustainable solutions to some of the world’s most pressing problems. As Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General stated at the World Economic Forum, in Davos in 1999: “*Let us choose to unite the power of markets with the strength of universal ideals. Let us choose to reconcile the creative forces of private entrepreneurship with the needs of the disadvantaged and the requirements of future generations*” (Wilson and Post, 2013).
- Wraparound services (what types?; without conditions?)

- Energy prices
- Improving the food offer
- Technological innovations
- Cost of food disposal
- Good Samaritan legislation
- Regulating redistribution of surplus food
- Difficulties in accessing sources of funding
- The absence of an intervening state - the shifting governmentality of (food) aid
- Scarcity of resources that allow a thorough assessment of their activities and services provided, which weakens the public image of these responses
- Finding the right location – does it need to be stationary? Accessible by donating food companies and being close to where the demand is – potential for use of GIS to analyse white space to inform locational decisions for SSMs (Lienbacher *et al.*, 2021).
- Sustainability of volunteer support

Moving on from the broader local context, national and international learning and academic sources, what follows details the real experiences of local people, both those accessing support and those delivering it, captured via a digital survey, face-to-face interviews, telephone and Zoom interviews, and a focus group.

## **Causeway Coast and Glens Food Access Survey**

### **Background**

The research team felt it was important that the research include a survey that would attempt to capture the views and experiences of citizens within Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area. This survey was designed to include a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions. Following receipt of ethical approval from Ulster University on 27<sup>th</sup> October, the survey link was shared with SSMs and food banks and wider anti-poverty stakeholders within the CCG Borough Council area to disseminate to their clients and contacts. Additionally it was shared from the CCG Borough Council corporate Facebook page on 7<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> November.

In total 47 responses have been received. We would note that there is likely an inherent selection bias within the results, as people who do not have or have not had difficulty in affording food may not have believed it appropriate to complete the survey. However, while emphasising that the survey makes no claim to be representative of the general CCG population this should not diminish the readers' interpretation of the results, telling as they do the reality of life for some citizens within CCG Borough Council area.

### **Quantitative questions**

#### *Weekly cost and increases*

The majority of respondents (93.6%) reported that their weekly spend on groceries has increased within the last three months. This increase varies greatly amongst respondents (in line with their family size and circumstances) but more than half report increases of between £20 and £60 per week.

More than four in five respondents (83%) reported that in the last twelve months, they were often or sometimes *worried* that food would run out before they had money to buy more. Three-quarters (74.5%) went on to report that often or sometimes the food *did* run out before they could buy more, with a similar proportion (76.6%) noting that they reduced the size of meals or skipped entire meals because there wasn't enough money.

More than two in five (44.7%) reported that in the last twelve months they had been hungry and not eaten due to a lack of money for food, with 25% noting they had been hungry almost every month and 44.4% that they had been hungry some months but not every month.

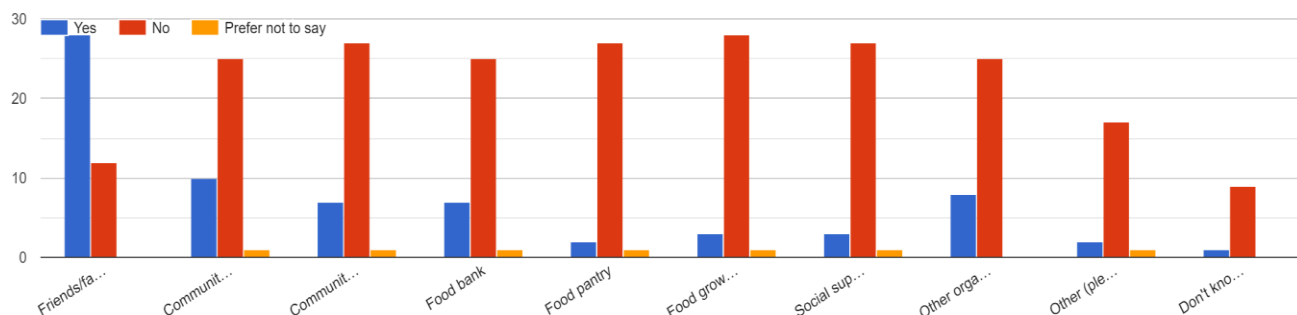
#### *Accessing support*

In terms of accessing support, the majority of respondents (62.2%) accessed help from family or friends, with smaller numbers accessing a community fridge (ten), a community hub (seven), a food bank (nine, which includes eight from the table results and one from details given under 'Other') or a social supermarket (four, which includes three from the table results and one from details given under 'Other'). Other places that people received support were given as:

- Apps such as *Olio* or *Too Good To Go*
- Citizens' Advice, St Vincent de Paul
- Home delivery (although unclear from where)

## One respondent noted that they ‘do without’.

7) If you needed help with accessing food for yourself or your family in the past 12 months: Which, if any, of the following places or people did you go to for help? (Please select all that apply)



When asked ‘if you have visited a food bank or SSM in the past, how did you find out about it?’, 50% answered N/A. This is noteworthy as it suggests that many people who need help (as identified from the other answers) are not accessing support from food banks or SSM. [This agrees with other published data; for example Food Standards Agency research (2022) reported that 18% of respondents had experienced food insecurity in Northern Ireland in the past 12 months while approximately 4% of respondents had used a food bank or other emergency food provider in the same period.] Of those who did access this support, 31% found out about it from an advice organisation with the remainder from GP, friends, community group, Facebook, health visitor and support worker. One respondent stated ‘not possible for a working person’.

### *Other support*

One in nine (10.9%) respondents reported that they had accessed an emergency grant in the last twelve months, and 4.3% reported that they had accessed advice services which meant they did not then need food aid.

### *Food aid accessibility*

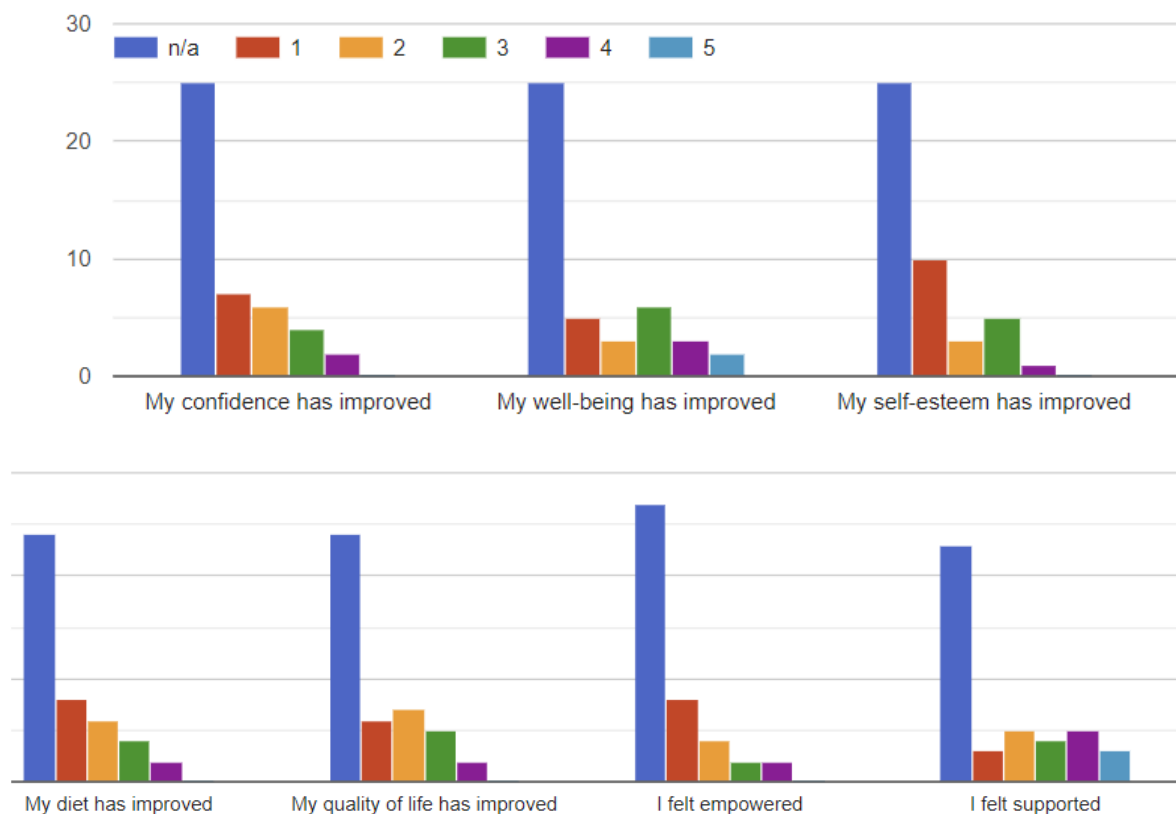
A section of the survey asked a number of attitudinal questions around the availability of food aid support, the accessibility including opening hours, whether there is choice available, whether the food is healthy and so on. For the specific questions and detailed responses, please see Appendix A. In summary, by far the most common response is ‘Don’t Know’ which would suggest a lack of engagement by respondents with food banks or SSMs. Where affirmative or negative responses were received, these tended to suggest that food banks were easier to access than SSMs but SSMs represented a more dignified way in which to access food compared to food banks. Other responses concerning opening hours, proximity of foodbanks/SSMs to home, feeling comfortable to enter the organisations, relevance of services and support offered, and value for money received from the food banks/SSMs returned comparable results signalling negligible differences between the models.

### *Impact of accessing a food bank or social supermarket*

This section asked a number of attitudinal questions around the impact of accessing a food bank or social supermarket to determine if their confidence, wellbeing, self esteem, diet and quality of life had improved, and if they felt supported, empowered and listened to [where 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 5 = Agree; and 5 = Strongly Agree].

There is quite a diversity of results in this section. Again the full results can be seen at Appendix A.

**As a result of accessing a food bank/social supermarket...**



In summary, after ‘don’t know’ the most common response to the statements is strongly disagree. This would suggest that the experience is not routinely making the difference to people’s feelings and wellbeing it is designed to do and consideration should be given to the fact that longer-term policy responses are required to lift people from their vulnerable circumstances.

**Qualitative responses**

Under the question ‘What aspects, if any, do you like about the food bank/social supermarket/other food support in your area?’, responses captured a diversity of views. Of 27 narrative responses, around half were positive:

*“Lifesaver”*

*“They’re accessible to the people that might require them”*

*“The variety of the food”*

*“Ease of access and the welcome”*

Two responses could be categorised as negative in terms of respondents stating that people might abuse the service. One response outlined concern that only three parcels were available and that a paid coordinator would “*look down their nose at you*”.

Responses identified embarrassment at needing to go, and concerns around privacy, while some expressed that they did not know where services were, or that there were none locally suggesting an opportunity to raise awareness of the services available across the Borough.

Finally, one response noted: “*They should not be needed*”.

When asked for ways food banks or SSMs could be improved to meet respondents’ needs, again there is a rich diversity in the answers. This question had 31 responses so it is clear that respondents had views to share.

Concern about the capacity of the services:

*“They need more support to be able to get supplies of food they need. There isn't a lot of food for people with dietary requirements which is what a lot of people can't afford to buy.”*

*“Give them funding immediately.”*

Many comments about accessibility and opening times:

*“Delivery to those genuinely unable to physically go to one.”*

*“(Make it) Easier to get to if you have no transport.”*

*“Open more hours.”*

*“Change opening hours so that they're open outside of normal working hours (9-5).”*

*“Be more accessible to the working class, people who work are being disadvantaged.”*

*“Maybe have a late night opening.”*

*“More flexible open hours. Evenings.”*

Need for awareness raising:

*“Easy access to them...more details on how to access them, suitable times to speak to someone...they need to have information stalls for people to get info on how to get support...”*

*“I think they need to explain better how they work and how to access them.”*

*Concerns about privacy:*

*“Social supermarkets are better as not as publicised to show you're going there...”*

*“Make it more private so half the estate don't know or talk about you.”*

*“We only have access for one hour per week at a mobile van where everyone can see who is getting food.”*

*“More confidential.”*

*Choice in what is available:*

*“Better variety of food stuff”*

*“Let me choose items”*

*“More fresh fruit and vegetables”*

*Concerns around the implicit or explicit faith-based messaging as a condition of receipt of food aid:*

*“Leave religion out of it”*

*Referrals: “No referral needed to access food banks”*

Finally, one response noted: *“Close them.”*

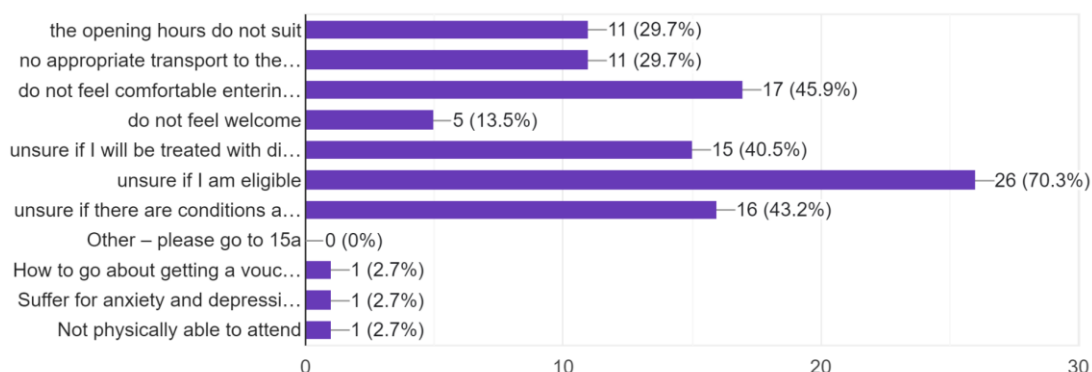
**Barriers**

When asked what barriers there were to accessing food support when needed, the most common barriers identified were as follows:

- Unsure if I am eligible (68.4%)
- Do not feel comfortable entering the service (47.4%)
- Unsure if there are conditions attached (42.1%)
- Unsure if I will be treated with dignity (39.5%)

15) We really want to understand any barriers that have impacted on your ability to access food support. Please tell us if you needed food support b...from using the service (please tick al that apply):

37 responses



The narrative responses sharing any other reasons why they did not or could not access food support provide important detail of the diversity of reasons why people don't access food support even when they may need it. The barriers were identified

as the accessibility of the provision in terms of location or opening hours, embarrassment at presenting oneself to the food bank/SSM and uncertainty as to one's eligibility:

- *"Because I don't drive"*
- *"Not private enough" and "Don't want to go to where it's at"*
- *"The times did not suit to collect it. Only available one hour per week where I live and couldn't afford petrol to go to another town"*
- *"Embarrassment" and "Too embarrassed and just went without"*
- *"Because we work, I didn't think we would be able to get any help"*
- *"We have enough food and I would rather not use them in case there are other people more in need."*

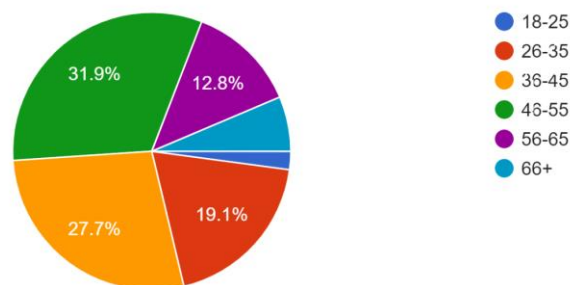
A further response highlights the intersectional nature of many of the challenges faced by those requiring food aid and as such is worth highlighting:

*"It's not easy to get there when you have small kids at home with medical conditions and have health issues yourself. Makes it harder when you have a child with autism who only eats certain types of foods"*

### **Respondents' demographics**

A broad spectrum of ages completed the survey, however it is worth noting that young people (2.1%) and older people (6.4%) were underrepresented in the final sample.

Please indicate which age bracket you are in  
47 responses



Almost three-quarters of respondents (72.3%) were female, and 27.7% male. Half of the sample was married or in a same sex partnership, 30.4% were single, 17.4% were separated and 2.2% were widowed.

Almost half (46.6%) had no children in the household, while 11.1% had one child, 20% had two, 17.8% had three and 4.4% had five children.

### **Education and employment status**



Please indicate your highest level of education

46 responses



Almost half of the respondents (47.7%) were in full or part time work, and 51% noted that someone in their household was in full or part time work. This is important given the comments above regarding eligibility and opening hours of food support services.

One in three (34.8%) noted that their annual household income was less than £10,000, with three in then (30.4%) noting their income between £10,000 and £19,999.

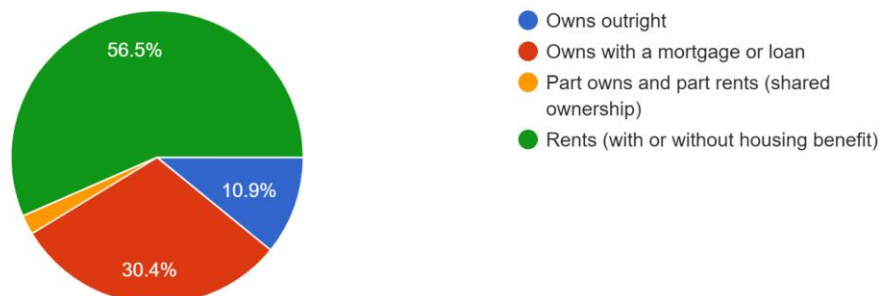
### Household location and tenure

Location of the household in terms of settlement type was evenly split with 36.2% living in an urban area and 34% self-reporting their area as rural (29.8% were unsure). This illustrates the diversity of locations across the Borough to which food banks/SSMs and wider advisory services and wraparound support are required to be accessible.

Housing tenure was similarly interesting since the majority of respondents (91.1% have to pay a mortgage or rent to keep a roof over their heads representing another essential and sizeable monthly outgoing: more than half (56.5%) live in rented accommodation and three in ten (30.4%) are paying a mortgage.

Does your household own or rent this accommodation?

46 responses



Finally, when asked whether there was anything else respondents would like to share in their own words, 14 responses were received. Comments focused variously on feelings of shame about being unable to afford food:

*"I find it humiliating"*

The need for government to intervene re: the cost of living:

*"Help"*

*"They do brilliant work but need more support so they can be available to more people in need and to break the stigma for those that need it but feel uncomfortable accessing them. The government needs to act to try and reduce food costs or increase wages/benefits to compensate the rise of food, fuel, heating and electric. A lot more are going to experience difficulties this winter and foodbank social supermarkets and food support may not be able to cope with the demand."*

The urgency of the issue for the working poor:

*"A lot of people that work can't get help and they are struggling with the raise of bills to..." (sic)*

*"Unsure how you become eligible for a food bank as I work full-time in a low paid job."*

The need to give consideration to rural accessibility of food aid organisations;

*"There is no access for working people in rural areas."*

The need to raise awareness as to their existence:

*"Didn't even know there was a social supermarket and still don't know where."*

A call to increase the number of food aid organisations:

*"We need more social supermarkets in Causeway area."*

## **Interviews and Focus Group Background and Methodology**

The Research Team met with five representatives from two SSMs (RESET at Vineyard Compassion, Coleraine, and Limavady Community Development Initiative) and two representatives from two food banks (Ballymoney Food Bank and Ballycastle Food Bank) in the CCG Borough Council area. In addition, ten food bank/SSM clients agreed to be interviewed and received a £25 Causeway Coast and Glens gift card as reimbursement for their time. Ethical approval was sought and granted from Ulster University’s Research Ethics Filter Committee on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2022. Interviews were conducted between 7<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> November 2022 with each lasting between 30 and 75 minutes. Interviews were conducted through the medium most convenient to the interviewee. Six interviews were conducted face to face, two over the telephone and seven were conducted remotely via Teams or Zoom. Client interviews were not recorded while two food bank/SSM interviews were recorded. Additionally, one focus group was held online via Teams with seven stakeholders from the wider statutory and voluntary sector in CCG. Interview notes were scribed during each interview, written up and analysed for recurring themes – the detail of which is provided below. For the purposes of this analysis, no manager, client or stakeholder has been identified; instead, their status as a client or manager has been stated with no other identifying detail provided to respect the principle of anonymity under which each interview was granted.

### **Interview sample**

<b>Stakeholder type</b>	<b>Number of representatives</b>	
Food bank manager	2	Ballycastle Food Bank Ballymoney Food Bank
Food bank client	3	-
Social supermarket manager	5	RESET Vineyard Compassion, Coleraine Limavady Community Development Initiative
Social supermarket client	7	-

### **Need and reliance are increasing**

As stated from the outset of this report, the combination of the cost-of-living and energy crises while we continue to emerge from a global pandemic which had negative implications for people’s employment and income status have had severe consequences on people’s financial stability. There are stories in the media that suggest the increasing visibility of food banks has contributed to the increasing number of people relying on food banks. Interviewees debunk this myth authentically with their own accounts, citing various reasons for needing food aid: marriage breakdown, incarceration, inherited debt, increasing gas prices and mortgage rates, and substance misuse, but the common factor among all interviewees is reduced income:

*"I buy just what I need and no more - and sometimes not what I need."*  
[Food bank/SSM client]

*"At one point I wondered what a square cut off my curtain with butter would taste like!"* [Food bank/SSM client]

Food bank/SSM managers are alert to the inner strength it requires to walk over the threshold of a food bank/SSM:

*"It can be a humiliating experience accessing food banks."* [Food bank/SSM client]

*"Asking for help is very hard."* [Food bank/SSM client]

*"We have heard of a family who walked to Coleraine to go to the foodbank – that's 14,000 steps. You only do that if you're in dire need."* [Food bank/SSM manager]

It is for these reasons that it is important that our neighbours who find themselves in reduced circumstances are met warmly and respectfully so that they can commence the journey of rebuilding their sense of self-worth.

*"I was nervous to attend but you are made to feel welcome and realise you're not a failure."* [Food bank/SSM client]

*"The first time, I felt a bit wary. Worried they would look down their noses at you. I was a wee bit proud."* [Food bank/SSM client]

*"They don't make you feel a second-class citizen, or that you've failed."* [Food bank/SSM client]

*"It makes you feel there's other people in the same boat. That you're not alone in the boat. They'll try their best to help you."* [Food bank/SSM client]

Some believed that while their situation was much reduced, they were unsure if they were eligible for support:

*"Felt like I wasn't badly off enough, felt guilty."* [Food bank/SSM client]

*"I am not embarrassed but at the same time felt 'I can't believe I have to do this'."* [Food bank/SSM client]

And some worried that their need for repeat visits would be doubted:

*"I didn't want to go to the same food bank a third time in case they thought I was taking the hand."* [Food bank/SSM client]

For others, there was recognition that this is a common status experienced by many others:

*“I think at the minute there is no stigma. Everybody’s suffering.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

*“There go I but for the grace of God. It can go wrong instantly.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

### **Sources of food donations**

The food banks’ and SSMs’ food donations came variously from individuals, churches, school, community groups, clubs and societies, food manufacturing and retail businesses (some with match funding), and FareShare sources. Generally, the food banks and social supermarkets were not concerned about the security of their food supply since they reported how food donations have been steady and whenever stocks are low a public request generally replenishes the stock satisfactorily: *“people will always fill the gap”* (Food bank/SSM manager]. However, some food banks/SSMs found themselves having to subsidise low stock with their own funds and were interested to receive cash donations (as well as food donations) to accommodate this approach. Some food banks/SSMs had meaningful links with farmers which they commented offered the best of quality. There was some concern that if FareShare had to, for business reasons, increase the costs recovered from their community food members then this would prove impactful on their operating costs and principal source of food. A further consideration was the quality/short dates on some products. If short-dated food couldn’t be distributed in a timely way, this meant that the food bank/SSM had to dispose of it, although managers noted that there was no additional cost burden on them for doing so.

### **Funding sources**

The food banks and SSMs reported different funding mechanisms. All were grateful for CCG funding as a result of reserve funding from DfC for Covid recovery, which has now ended. This was complemented by their own fundraising efforts, membership contributions and funds from membership organisations to which they were affiliated. Most had concerns around security of funding streams, compounded by signalling from other organisations they would have to reduce costs or reduce capacity. This was problematic at a time of unprecedented reliance on their food parcel, advisory services and wider wraparound support.

Annual operating costs included rent, rates, petrol/diesel for vans for mobile outreach, (non-)food purchases to subsidise stock, and some salaries. Some food banks/SSMs had at least one paid member of staff supported by a team of dedicated volunteers. The benefits of a paid staff member to assume responsibility and accountability for the food bank/SSM to run with the appropriate governance were stated, especially given the food safety obligations from Environmental Services Departments and reporting requirements of the funder(s). A minority of food banks/SSMs reported having to pay no rent or salaries due to others' philanthropy, but this was not the norm.

### **Operating model**

Various operating models were evidenced through the interviews. Membership and use differed depending on the food bank or SSM used. The food banks generally operated on an aspirational three food parcel limit in order to attempt to reduce dependency on what is meant to be a short-term measure. The SSMs offered longer interventions (12 weeks to six months although clients were not always clear as to

the programme's duration) but again there was some extension possible if it was deemed unhelpful to remove support at the membership's intended end. This timeframe provides the opportunity to engage with the advisory team – for them to get to understand the client and for the client to trust and benefit from the support offered. The SSMs offered tiered programmes whereby the membership had different prices depending on your progress through the initiative – the first three months offering lower-priced food than the second three months in order to allow clients to build up a '*savings pot*' to improve their financial stability. All clients commented that the membership offered excellent value for money.

The access to food also differed by model. The food banks offered pre-packaged food parcels with the opportunity to swap out items with which the clients were unfamiliar which offered the additional benefit of reducing waste. Some interviewees noted that when they received things they wouldn't use, they would re-donate it to another food bank. The SSMs operated either as a 'normal' supermarket whereby clients browsed the aisles making their own food choices or self-selecting from an online catalogue.

Each interviewee commented how crucial it was to treat the whole person and that food, while important, had to be complemented with efforts to tackle the underlying causes of poverty – through advice, signposting or engagement with various programmes/courses. In this way, efforts were made to tackle the presenting problem and underlying issues and therefore reduce poverty and social need.

One interviewee commented how there are three strands to their model: (1) *provision of crisis support* (food bank); (2) *empowerment – life tools* (SSM); and (3) *journey towards employment and purpose* (SSM). A key focus of the SSMs is the wraparound support. While food aid can be distributed to increasing numbers of people, the biggest limitation is staffing (costly) support workers. Given the remit of this scoping exercise, it is prudent to consider the necessary trade-off(s): do we widen food support to provide food access to the greatest number of people possible within operating limits or do we narrow capacity to offer more comprehensive wraparound support?

### **Operating hours**

One food bank/SSM manager commented on the need to work beyond scheduled hours "*Because people need you to be there*". The dedication of the pool of paid and volunteer staff resourcing these sources of charitable food aid are important because, in the words of one client: "*I don't choose when I'm hungry, neither does anyone else*".

### **Impacts of the food aid for clients**

Clients were unanimously grateful for the food they received commenting that they had a degree of choice in the food they received by choosing online, browsing the shelves and/or swapping swap things out from pre-packed parcels. They could get most things that they would get in a 'normal' shop.

*"You can make a meal with what you get."* [Food bank/SSM client]

*"It takes the worry out of where the next meal will come from."* [Food bank/SSM client]

There was a marked difference in the availability of fresh fruit and vegetables across the four sites. Whereas it is the practice in some sites to supplement donations by buying in locally grown produce, others have relationships with local farmers who supply potatoes and carrots etc.

*“There’s not a big lot of fruit.” [Food bank/SSM client]*

*“We can’t get all the fruit and veg we need here. We make do with what is here.” [Food bank/SSM client]*

*“The fruit & veg is not very varied - last week there was only cooking apples”. [Food bank/SSM client]*

Interestingly the food was not only welcomed for sustenance but also the flexibility this afforded to their household budget to pay for other essentials of living:

*“It’s a significant source of food - frees up income for other things. Cleaning things are so expensive, kids’ things are always needed. Helps with affording other things - price of fuel - car and home heating and electric (gas is awful).” [Food bank/SSM client]*

*“It helps my budget to go further for odds and ends – bread, potatoes, perishables; everything else we manage...” [Food bank/SSM client]*

*“I could budget better. The cheaper price meant I could budget other things for the children. I was getting into deeper water - coming here was the best thing that happened.” [Food bank/SSM client]*

*“Because I could budget my shopping, I don’t have arrears.” [Food bank/SSM client]*

*“Looking to the winter months, eating will not be a problem and I am getting by with heating. I use the money freed up by accessing the food bank to afford other things...” [Food bank/SSM client]*

### **Beyond food**

Managers and clients also cited social and other non-financial benefits of accessing support from food banks/SSMs. For many it was a reason to get out of the house, something which they may not otherwise have done without the confidence they gained by participating in the programmes:

*“I look forward to it. The people, the food, everything.” [Food bank/SSM client]*

For others the experience improved other internal emotional states:

*“I can go in there now and just be myself.” [Food bank/SSM client]*

*“I feel like I am somebody now.” [Food bank/SSM client]*

*“My stress levels have virtually disappeared, as have my anxiety levels. I am on top of things again.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

*“Mentally I didn’t feel prejudged. The support is all encompassing.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

*“They don’t make you feel like a failure. People can judge you because you can’t do your finances - they don’t. They don’t even ask ‘why are your finances so bad?’”* [Food bank/SSM client]

*“I feel at home here. Never liked going anywhere. Never felt safe, never trusted anyone until I came here. They’re so welcoming - they don’t look at you like you’re a bit of dirt!”* [Food bank/SSM client]

*“This is the first time (client) engaged with anything in her life – feels like she belongs more and is accepted somewhere. She has blossomed.”* [Food bank/SSM client’s support worker]

Food bank workers were described variously as fairy godmothers and lifesavers:

*“If I wasn’t here, I wouldn’t be alive.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

*“The organisation saved my life – the food kept me going and freed up money to buy coal when previously I was choosing between buying coal and food.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

Managers were keen to stress the benefits of person-to-person contact. Indeed, the social aspect of these forms of food aid were considered to be nearly more important than the food itself. Managers and volunteers were keen to engage clients in ‘*conversations with purpose*’. The face-to-face operating mode and accompanied shopping exercise (“*We learn so much doing the shopping with them*”) proved to be effective ways to initiate such discussions which served as ‘*fact finding missions*’ to get to know the clients and inform the services to which they could later be usefully signposted.

There were some less positive views about the reception received at a food bank/SSM:

*“There can be a lack of understanding of the dignity of the person. Can be a humiliating experience.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

### **Wraparound support**

As stated above, it is important to consider the factors that contributed to people requiring this form of aid in the first place. Everyone’s circumstances are different and unique to each individual; however it is generally true that people’s resilience is paper thin when they first enter a foodbank or SSM. They feel overwhelmed; eating and heating are only two of a myriad of decisions facing us daily. Therefore, it is necessary to treat the whole person by offering, in a co-designed way, access to courses, programmes and training – food, cooking on a budget, nutrition, mental health,



employability, debt, money management etc – that provides the internal motivation to empower and support clients to a positive outcome. It was generally held by food bank / SSM managers that “*education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty*” – early intervention and giving people responsibility for their own outcomes were upheld as important prerequisites of any successful intervention.

*“The employees try to link in with everybody to provide the most meaningful wraparound support. We link in with organisations that have the expertise.”* [Food bank/SSM manager]

*“Members meet with a support worker re: goal setting and identify actions to take to move towards achieving that goal. Move to a tailored approach – person-centred (ie) wraparound a person. Be realistic to prioritise and aim towards a main goal(s) – quick wins to keep members motivated and encouraged. Scaffold the person - scaffolding comes down as the repointing is completed! It’s about how they (the clients) step off the programme.”* [Food bank/SSM manager]

*“I attended a six-week money course from CAP – suggested to me by CAP, but no obligation to do this. I enjoyed meeting new people at it.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

However, there was some discord with respect to the conditionality of food aid – whereupon access to free or lower cost food was contingent on signing up to personal development courses. All could see the merits of treating the whole person, but some balked at the notion that membership may be withheld if clients failed to engage meaningfully in designated support programmes.

*“Deal with debt/money management/lack of engagement and continuity – but can’t make people – there needs to be the internal motivation.”* [Food bank/SSM manager]

*“One course you have to sign up to - going through your bills. Not keen on this. People need a bit of privacy somewhere.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

*“It is conditional on you attending a number of courses/things of Christian value.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

### **Looking to clients’ futures**

Some clients expressed uncertainty and concern about how they would cope after their membership or term of support ended:

*“Don’t know what I’m gonna do when it stops.”* [Food bank/SSM client]

### **Broken system**

However, food bank and SSM managers are united in a common chorus that the system is broken and the underlying causes of food and financial insecurity must be identified and eradicated. They find themselves toeing a fine line between ‘*throwing life rings*’ into the water by providing food aid while simultaneously recognising that this model does not serve to pull anyone out of the circumstances in which they are drowning. None want charitable food aid to be perpetuated as the default solution to poverty yet cannot articulate an alternative to their existence when so many remain in need. They are, oftentimes, the fourth emergency service and do not wish to see their clients hungry and helpless.

## Anti-Poverty Stakeholder Focus Group

### Focus Group representation

Building Ballysally Together
St Vincent de Paul
Sure Start Partnership
Youth Education and Resilience Causeway Rural and Urban Network
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

There is a considerable community of practice in CCG concentrating its efforts on reducing poverty, reducing inequalities, food insecurity, fuel poverty, financial precariousness and public health messaging. Participants were agreed that the need was increasing. Food aid organisations are well used in some CCG communities and the distribution of food aid was welcomed as freeing up money for electricity and fuel and helping to alleviate some stressors. Participants agreed that the (voluntary) monetary contribution requested by some food aid organisations was affordable and represented value for money but there was a sense that any attempt to restrict food parcel dissemination to three times was ill-advised at this time and needed to be extended to support clients beyond the immediacy of their need because clients “*hate, week after week, having to ask for help*”.

Sub-groups of the population of concern included young people who are reluctant to access food banks and would “*rather go hungry*”. In terms of older people, discussion centred around social eating and community café provision which might be the only meal some older people get each day and their reduced mobility rendering the mobile food as ever more important. Additionally, participants were concerned for rural prospective clients who may not ask for help for fear of their circumstances becoming known to their neighbours in these small communities. Some participants lauded the mobile food aid/deliveries as invaluable. There was support for the flexibility of vouchers to replace food parcels and support clients to buy their own food. There was some discussion around religious connections and food aid organisations, but participants debunked this reported perception.

Participants recognised unanimously the vision not to normalise food aid organisations and hypothesised that there needs to be a balance struck of taking away the stigma without institutionalising the need. The policy tension was clear in

terms of “we need more space and more money but if we let it get bigger, it would be a job in itself!”

In terms of wraparound support there was not the same unanimity. Some participants commented that when prospective clients were required to commit to courses, they didn't want to do them and went elsewhere that didn't impose the same conditionality as evidenced by the quote: “We need food – if I need to sign up to anything else to get that food, you know what – I'll not bother!” Opinions differed between needing to support people to access food without strings attached while others preferred food aid to be coupled with wraparound support that puts conditions on people, while understanding vulnerabilities.

Solutions and recommendations proffered by participants included:

- Help with organisation's own electricity/gas bills to support more clients but also to avoid organisations having to use their cash reserves to pay higher energy bills on their premises. Other running costs could usefully be supported in terms of insurance being index linked to inflation.
- CCG Councillors could advocate for their electorate at Stormont/Westminster in terms of policy solutions around benefits (increase in benefit allowances, remove the two-child limit, and support for working families), childcare being accessible and affordable, work that pays (pay wages consistent with cost-of-living increases), and housing issues.

Participants agreed that success would mean:

- there would be equity for all
- there would be sustainable, suitable jobs for young people including the eradication of zero hours contracts
- stop the fire fighting and focus on early intervention meaning that food banks and SSMs were no longer needed
- universal, not targeted provision (e.g.) Free School Meals and distribution of cooking equipment – tackles stigma
- people would value their food
- teach blind taste testing to demonstrate the huge savings available by not buying branded food products all the time
- educate parents re: healthy eating (schools would be beneficial here)
- provide people with slow cookers/air fryers – provide the equipment to cook a healthy meal affordably
- businesses would address their waste and increase awareness of *Too Good to Go* and *Gregg's App* from a sustainability perspective
- change the dynamic by reframing the narrative by saving the world – i.e. sustainability not poverty as the lens
- there would be no referral system and no bureaucracy
- when things go wrong, the infrastructure and solutions would be in place to help move people forward; and
- we would be looking at people enjoying higher order rights beyond the essential physiological needs of food, heat and housing (“We thought we were a society that was far away from this, and now we're not. It's very sad”).

We need a triple-pronged approach: crisis needs (food and fuel); policy options available/necessary; education – responsibility re: services available for all and

differences between services and how to access these to overcome lack of knowledge and misconceptions.

## **Solutions**

There were many calls to action arising from the interviewees that may be grouped as below:

### *Address the underlying causes of (food) poverty*

The Research Team and interviewees are explicitly in agreement that charitable food aid is not the answer to eradicate food insecurity. Unfortunately however, food is the flexible item of the household budget and provision of low-cost food has proven to be a vital crutch for those whose cupboards and refrigerators remain stubbornly empty due to the myriad pressures on their limited incomes. Almost as meaningful as the food for nourishment is the freeing up of money to afford other living essentials.

There again exists the tension between not wishing to see the further institutionalisation and normalisation of food aid alongside the certainty that to remove this lifeline would have devastating impacts for those so dependent on this food source at this time. No one wishes to create new structures. Thirty + years of food banking has not eradicated or reduced the prevalence of food insecurity. Therefore, the research team recommends that a cash-first approach to bolstering people's incomes (through continued advocacy and campaigning for income maximisation through work that pays locally, increased support for people to set up their own business and ongoing promotion of local industry since towns and villages within the CCG catchment have very limited industry and councillors should actively encourage more and better paid jobs locally; alongside a fit for purpose welfare system that provides an adequate safety net for those unable to work) has to be the priority for our elected representatives to advocate for at Stormont and Westminster.

Secondary to this is the potential for the community sector to ask for financial donations and not food donations so that any support in-kind may enable and empower clients to afford and choose their own food with dignity. This supports the current calls by the Independent Food Aid Network for financial donations for food banks to enable them to provide a *variety* of support.

### *Nothing About Us, Without Us:*

Interviewees suggested that local, regional and national decision makers would benefit from attending informal Poverty Truth Commissions or site visits to understand (1) the prevalence of food insecurity and poverty more generally; (2) the work of the community, voluntary and charitable sector in this space; and (3) what community groups need in order to be able to continue the vital work they are doing.

### *Location, Location, Location*

Location of any SSM/food bank is a key consideration. It needs to be accessible and served by public transport but discreet enough to afford privacy to clients. Given the wide geographical reach of the four legacy councils that have merged into Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, it is deemed impossible for a single SSM to deliver food and wraparound support in a face-to-face way with the appropriate level of intensity without a dilution effect. Providers do not want to be party to tokenistic wraparound support – we cannot lack depth in this regard if we mean to bring about real change. The social aspect, personal development and signposting to advisory services have been proven to be effective at supporting clients holistically to feel empowered and to take responsibility for and ownership of their outcomes. The

working relationships between the area's two SSMs are mutually supportive, and it is the recommendation of this research that both are required to offer the accessibility so needed by the prospective client base from both urban and rural environs. Additionally, the programmes should be designed with sufficient flexibility to accommodate the individual needs of each client via more reactive / responsive/dynamic/lighter/more in-depth tailored versions – the tapering or extension of programme support should be made possible so that clients may progress at a pace sustainable to them.

Mobile food vans should be considered for particularly remote or difficult to access locations and locations poorly served by public transport routes. Consideration should also be given to supporting food banks to deliver food to isolated people by funding unbranded vans to respect the privacy and dignity principles while accessing food in this way.

#### *Simplified funding procedures*

Foodbank and SSM managers unanimously called for additional funding while simultaneously qualifying that they recognise that this is perpetuating the normalisation of charitable food aid as a default solution to food insecurity. With this caveat aside, grant funding for community sector initiatives should be simplified, streamlined and standardised so that their workers and volunteers may focus on the more impactful work without being distracted by overly cumbersome administration. There is a very real sense among the sector that it is they who are meeting the commitments of the public sector as signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals for *No Poverty* and *Zero Hunger*. The sector is aware of the importance of sound governance, evaluation and reporting back to funders but this is not their primary purpose. Consideration should be given to therefore reducing this reporting burden. With respect to evaluation commitments, again the sector recognises their value in disseminating good practice and reporting learnings from failed interventions so that mistakes need not be repeated; however, the language should be simplified and written in plain English to reduce tokenistic responses that hide the true outcome so that progress may be reported meaningfully by clients who understand the metrics being measured.

Coupled with less restrictive funding was the request for community initiatives' buildings to be zero rated for local rates in order to significantly reduce their operating costs through this cost-of-living crisis.

#### *Other Models of Low-Cost Food Provision*

CCG could investigate/pilot other models for low-cost food provision (eg) Social Super Discount Stores, austerity retail, community food hubs, Apps etc. Councillors should encourage initiatives with local retailers to make nutritious food more affordable.

#### *Other interventions suggested*

*Lower-cost energy cooking equipment:* There is some support for the provision of air fryers to households as has been done in other council areas for slow cookers. This may be particularly appropriate given the lower running costs of air fryers compared to conventional ovens, which would again be supportive amidst the ongoing cost-of-living/energy crises.

*Help to Save:* CCG should increase awareness of the Government scheme where the government match-funds individuals' savings after three years.

**Longer-term considerations outside the gift of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council**

CCG Councillors can proactively advocate for wider policy solutions that are not within their gift to deliver, for example, a fit for purpose benefits system that maintains pace with inflation and retains the £20 uplift and other Welfare Mitigation, Right to Food legislation, cash-first approach, commitment to and promotion of the Real Living Wage, extension of eligibility and (universal) provision of free school meals, healthy start vouchers, breakfast clubs, school holiday food provision and exploration of Universal Basic Income.

### Case study - an alternative model

The Larder in East Belfast is transitioning away from being a food bank to a more progressive model of support. This is their journey in their own words:

“The Larder in East Belfast is run out of a deconsecrated church and since 2013 we’ve been offering support by way of food to those in the local community who find themselves food insecure. We began by responding to emergency needs, for instance when someone returned home from a long stretch in hospital to find their benefits cut because they hadn’t responded to a request; or someone finding themselves in temporary hardship through an unexpected expense, like a broken washing machine or such. These were the kind of occasional needs that the food bank model was designed for, emergency food for a time of crisis, usually four visits to help you get back on your feet after a difficult financial month.

But in the last number of years food banks have been popping up everywhere. It’s been fact checked and found true: There are now more food banks in the UK than there are McDonalds. Over the last few years, we found that we were increasingly supporting people on an ongoing basis. When we would get a referral through from an advice agency that used to be for four visits, increasingly advisors would be telling us ‘*This person’s situation isn’t going to change, there simply isn’t enough money coming in to live on*’... not enough to meet the most basic needs, like that of food.

So at The Larder we started to think this whole ‘*emergency provision*’ model isn’t actually cutting it anymore. And we decided we needed to provide a more dignified approach.

We used to say that as a food bank we’d love to be put out of business, that people’s situations would improve to such an extent that they no longer required us anymore. But we realised that isn’t happening anytime soon,

So we’ve decided to start building upon our strengths and really **meaning** business.’

We’ve stopped defining those we encounter by their deficits and started framing them by their assets. We’ve stopped referring to people as clients or ‘service users’ and we’ve invited them to become members.

“And controversially, we’ve stopped giving people ongoing free food and instead we’ve together agreed upon an affordable shop, harnessing the collective buying power and sourcing local nutritious food that is guaranteed weekly.”



This approach is tackling a number of different challenges, and tackling them in an ethical, dignified and effective way. Using principles of community wealth building, The Larder works as far as possible with local retailers, making a point of paying the going rate for goods. This is because they see their place as a part of the community and recognise the role of smaller local producers and retailers to provide local jobs. *“How can we spend money in the local economy and keep it there?”* By paying the going rate, they can support the local economy, which in turn may provide routes out of poverty for their membership. They describe this as allowing *“your values to be seen”*.

Another challenge is the balance between using surplus food to stock their shelves, while recognising the environmental impact of food waste locally, regionally and globally. They have shifted their donation model from asking for people to provide food (and therefore not having control over what is provided and when) to asking for monetary donations so they can buy in bulk where appropriate, and most importantly buy what their customers want and need, resulting in less wastage. This also means they can make their shop ‘predictable’, so that shoppers can trust they will get what they need rather than what is available.

The Larder approach also has an interesting position on the redistribution of surplus food. While they are simultaneously grateful for the low-cost food supply and keen to make the most of surplus for reasons of it fitting in with their environmental ethos, they want their overall offer to ‘instil in people that they’re worthy of the best’. By supplementing the donations of surplus food with purchases of fresh vegetables and fruit, meat vouchers, dairy and herbs & spices, the Larder aims to move the narrative away from poverty, towards dignity and choice.

Their stance on the conditionality of wraparound support is also interesting:

*“In our experience people have done every wraparound thing and they still have no money. Wraparound services - when it’s part of the deal? What’s that saying? Clients school us in gaps in our wraparound knowledge – they play the game because they have no choice!”*



In essence, The Larder has sought to reframe the narrative both in terms of shifting use to positive language (asset framing), valuing surplus food from an environmental perspective while encouraging those at risk of food insecurity to retain their sense of self-worth because the shame should be placed firmly on the system, not shame on those using the food banks.

[\*The Gleaners by Jean-Francois Millet\*](#)

*“It’s not a shame to ask for help – it’s a shame not to get that help.”*

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

For ease of reference the main conclusions and findings resulting from this research are organised against the original research aims of the project.

- **Carry out a scoping of the existing social supermarkets in Causeway Coast and Glens, in the context of the other services that tackle food poverty and poverty more generally.**

The research team met with representatives and clients from two food banks and two SSMs in CCG. Additionally, the research team held a focus group with wider anti-poverty stakeholders (providing advisory and support services to (sub)groups of the population) to inform the research and its reporting.

- **Provide a high-level assessment of need in the area.**

CCG's total population is 141,700, up 1% since 2011 and the number of households (57,600) has increased by 7% since 2011. The Borough has a larger proportion of people aged 65 and over (18.4%) compared to the Northern Ireland average (16.6%). And a slightly higher proportion of economically inactive citizens (29.3%) than the Northern Ireland average. Approximately one in six households (17%) in Northern Ireland are in relative poverty (NISRA, 2022). In CCG, the proportions for both relative (18%) and absolute poverty (16%) in CCG were higher than the average for NI.

In terms of food insecurity, a similar proportion (one in six, 16%) in Northern Ireland is experiencing food insecurity at some level (i.e.) low or very low food security and we know from our previous [food poverty report](#) in CC&G in 2015-16 that food poverty had reached a concerning level within the Borough, with affordability and accessibility proving important points of concern for families already at risk of fuel poverty. Two in five (41%) respondents reported being unable to comfortably feed themselves and their families three meals per day all of the time, and three in ten (31%) reported being forced to make a choice between food and other essentials. More than half of the respondents (54%) reported some anxiety about whether their budget would fulfil their food needs. While this was a non-representative sample of the population in the Borough (skewed in terms of Warm Homes/Affordable warmth recipients) it did signal issues of concern regarding food affordability and accessibility. It should also be remembered that food insecurity can be transient and/or cyclical (e.g.) numbers dependent on food aid may increase during the summer months when provision of free school meals ceases due to school closures. Therefore, it will be important to consider the interaction and integration of food aid organisations across the year.

Representatives from the food banks and SSMs highlighted that numbers are increasing to unprecedented levels and the high level assessment of need has never been greater.

- **Consider if there are particular geographical areas, communities or household types within the district who are in particular need?**

CCG Borough Council covers an area of 1,968 square kilometres, making it one of the largest Councils in Northern Ireland in terms of land mass. Previous research (McClelland *et al.*, 2021) identified geographic variances in terms of food poverty. It is imperative that a household's food poverty status is not epitomised by a person's residential location and that food is not further characterised by geographical discrepancies, whereby households are deprived by the distributional consequences

of their locality. Spatial variations exist in relation to rural and urban food poverty and rural dwellers face greater disadvantage in respect of obtaining a nutritiously adequate diet through higher food prices and lower product availability.

Additionally, the groups of people most at-risk of food insecurity include low-income households who simply cannot make ends meet due to the increasing cost of living, those with high levels of indebtedness, benefit limitations and sanctions (larger families and children ageing out of benefit support), familial breakups and former substance dependencies. The working poor and underemployed (who have been identified by food bank and SSM managers as a growing cohort among their repeat clients). Although not specifically identified by clients or managers, Northern Ireland-specific research has identified groups such as people in workless families, disabled people, carers and people in ethnic minority households having much higher poverty rates (JRF Report, 2022) and new benefit claimants experiencing benefit delays; respondents who self-reported poorer health status were more likely to be in food-poor households, as were those who had more children while food poverty was less likely to be reported in respondents who were older, in those who owned their property, and in those who had higher household incomes (Furey *et al*, 2019).

- **Provide an overview of how a proposed model or models would operate in CCG.**

The research team has not identified one particular model which should operate in CCG. No one food bank or SSM in the Borough has reported the capacity or willingness to offer the intensity of support that they do currently for reasons of geographical spread which complicates their ability to offer one-to-one support in a meaningful way. Instead a coordination function will be required where the sites could be delivered through a co-operative structure. One organisation (RESET) has been identified as being willing to carry out this role in partnership with the other players since no one organisation has the optimal location, premises or staffing capacity (support workers) to meet the current need.

There were reported concerns among operators that to grow their capacity in terms of food and wraparound support would, in effect, dilute their effectiveness and success in making a difference to people's lives. Furthermore, all managers and many clients commented that, while appreciating their support, food banks and SSMs should not be needed. It is therefore difficult to recommend an operating model without appearing to normalise further and institutionalise the placement of food banks and SSMs as the solution when it has been proven by our predecessors in North America that they do not resolve food insecurity.

However, in the interests of answering the research aim we have proposed the following operating principles for any organisation (consortium) tasked with continuing to offer food aid and wraparound support while, in parallel, longer-term solutions are sought to address the underlying structural issue of income poverty.

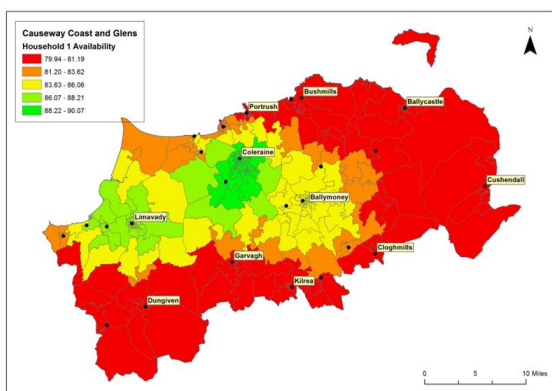
### **Operating principles**

In implementing any mechanism ultimately decided upon to support clients in vulnerable situations into the future, it will be important to agree and enact operational

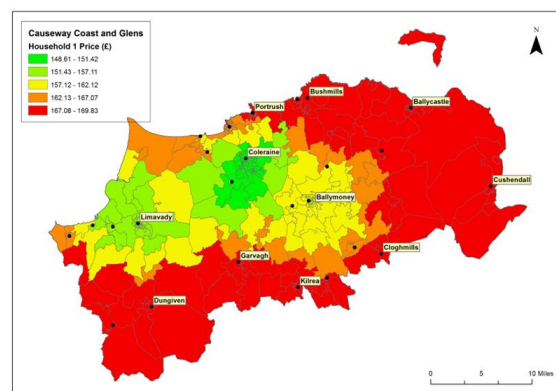
principles that describe the human approach to be adopted. The recurring principles from the interviews include:

- Welcoming
  - Respect individuals' uniqueness
  - Retaining and enhancing dignity
  - Value and worth: valuing people in line with their humanity and not just their economic footprint
  - Equity
  - Presence – Be there for the person
  - Engagement
  - Advocacy: Advocating for yourselves – getting voices out there
  - Visibility
  - Understanding
  - Non-judgemental
  - Direction
  - Collaboration
  - Hope
  - Relationship
  - Empowerment
  - Realism
  - Right (not charity)
  - Support not dependent on faith-based affirmations
  - Make affordable, healthy food accessible to as many as possible
  - People increasing in confidence is an achievable thing we can do
  - Kindness/empathy/care
  - Human centred
  - Willingness to engage in CCG's wider anti-poverty network and structure
  - Sustainability (through for example a supportive local authority and acquisition of a local food partner)
- **This should include, but not restricted to, consideration of the following:**
    - **Who will be eligible to access the support?**
    - **How people would access/be referred into the service and who would make the assessment of need?**

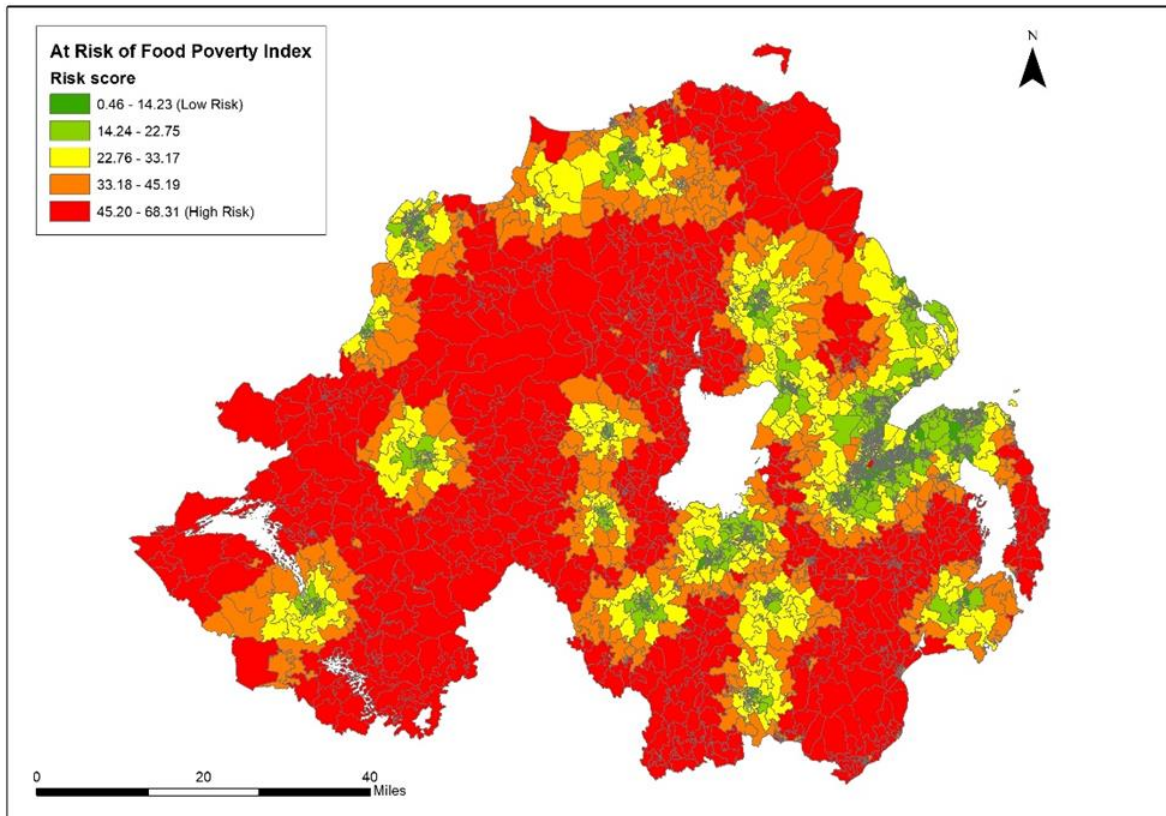
Evidence from the managers, focus group participants and international literature recommend an element of means-testing or household characteristics (such as income and family size) or voucher referral system to ensure that the support is targeted. The issue of targeted support is important and the literature indicates how some clients are identified by postcode means-testing. The research team would note that Ulster University's *At Risk of Food Poverty Index* (McClelland *et al.*, 2021) may be considered to be a valid decision-support tool which can be applied to support targeted interventions aimed at reducing food poverty risk. The maps below show the tool can be applied at both the local council and regional levels.



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The need is so great and waiting lists are currently maintained. Each operator reported trying to support as many people as possible and did not want to see anyone go hungry although there were occasions when clients were encouraged to get registered by voucher referrers to formalise their approach. These include allied health professionals and signposting advice agents such as Christians Against Poverty and St Vincent de Paul.

Consideration should be given to any income threshold identified. Some clients reported living on very constrained budgets making even token contributions occasionally unaffordable while simultaneously lauding the value for money the membership fees represented. A small number of clients reported self-restricting their attendance at food banks because they thought there may be others in more immediate need than they, while anecdotal evidence reported that some clients did not attend every week of their programme if they could not afford the weekly membership fee.

- **How suitable wraparound for individuals would be identified and managed?**
- **What services should be included in the wraparound? What could be included from the outset and what would need to be developed?**

Conditions are often imposed by SSMs for clients to sign up to programmes as wraparound support to help resolve, in some way, their financial instability that requires them to avail of food support since education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty. This is accepted differently by clients who either embrace the opportunity to improve their situation or consider it to be somewhat intrusive into their private circumstances. Evaluations undertaken by SSMs do support the interpretation that

clients being involved in their own responsibility to improve their scenarios is an important element of their sustainability. However, there also exists some tension by some operators and wider stakeholders that food aid should not be conditional. The wider anti-poverty stakeholders advised that they feed ideas for wraparound support into the food aid operators but are unclear if these are adopted ultimately. For their part, the SSMs report devising bespoke programmes and/or signposting to existing programmes in the Borough. The wraparound support commonly comprises food, cooking on a budget, nutrition, mental health, employability, debt and money management. Other ideas to augment this provision included cohort-specific interventions such as drugs advice and blind taste testing of foods to reduce people's default purchase of more expensive branded goods.

- **How can the service be accessible to as many people as possible with the Council area?**

The rurality of the Borough and its expansive geography present problems in terms of offering the intensity and consistent quality of support required by clients. Prospective clients in areas such as Cushendall, Garvagh and Kilrea were considered to be disadvantaged in terms of access to food aid and the wraparound support offered by the SSMs. One way in which the operators are handling this difficulty is offering delivery services/mobile outreach of food aid however it is more complicated to offer the wraparound support to all Borough Council areas. Operators recommend face to face support that can offer the services with the required intensity and this is not reported to be achievable via remote/online delivery. The social aspect of the 'conversations with purpose' are considered fundamental to the usefulness of the service(s) to the individual. Decision-makers are left to consider the necessary trade-off(s): do we widen food support to provide food access to the greatest number of people possible within operating limits or do we narrow capacity to offer more comprehensive wraparound support?

- **Numbers that could be supported? Could different approaches be taken for those requiring only short term support and those who may need longer term assistance?**

The operating models already offer different approaches - food banks offering food aid and signposting to advisory support services to between 10 to 100 households per week while the more intense wraparound support is ideally capped at 50 people per week given current staffing capacity. Additionally, the programmes run for between 12 weeks and six months although there is some fluidity here since SSM operators report not wishing to remove clients from wraparound support if their status would not withhold the lack of intervention and regression is likely. Furthermore, there are supplementary programmes for a further 12-week cycle at a higher rate of membership fee with the intention of transitioning people to be more independent once they leave the programme. For the food banks, each reports operating on the principle of distributing three food parcels for reasons of not wishing to create dependency; however, again, this lifeline will not be removed where clients are facing dire circumstances. Clients expressed a desire for the programmes to run as long as possible with many wondering what their options are while their initial membership is ongoing. There is certainly an opportunity for there to be tiered membership periods although an important principle may be that these are renewable, dependent on clients' progress in respect of financial stability.

- **How food stock will be sourced?**

All operators expressed that food supply is not a particular area of concern although those operators who were solely reliant on FareShare for their food stocks expressed worry that should FareShare’s operating model change and the costs to be a Community Food Member increased (due to cost of living or other pressures), they would have to rethink their food sourcing options.

All operators supplemented their food supply through individual/corporate/ church/school food donations or used cash reserves to offer a wider variety of foods - notably fruit and vegetables. This speaks to the need for funding agility to allow operators to reallocate grant funds across different budget lines to pay for those services that are needed and that are falling short (including toiletries, nappies and sanitary products, and household cleaning products).

- **Provide estimated annual costs to deliver the essential elements of the model, the desirable and the optimum?**

It is important to note that not only food but other elements are often heavily subsidised - rent, rates, energy, insurance etc, while volunteer and staff time are not appropriately costed.

Interviewees did not disclose their running costs beyond the general statement that they were supported through central DfC and/or CCG funds, supplemented by food donations, fundraising activities and philanthropy from a benevolent landlord. However, the literature does indicate that SSM costs are as below:

**Proportion of costs for a social supermarket (Holweg *et al.*, 2010, p.53)**

<b>Expenses %</b>	
Personnel	42
Rent	35
Transport	12
Administration / other	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Food banks and SSMs may have one paid managerial role (for reasons of accountability) but this is routinely highly supplemented by volunteer hours. The DfC pilot funds (and in-year monitoring reallocation of money) had been welcomed but the degree of unpaid work (18,000 hours) to support these services amounted to £165k in value terms using the national living wage benchmark in 2020. This is further evidence that the CVS is fulfilling public sector commitments at a below cost rate and outlines why an entirely different solution is required to address household income poverty locally, regionally and nationally.

Saxena and Tornaghi (2018) pose a question which offers a partial solution here:

“What about thinking beyond a consumption-based approach to solving the problem of food poverty? Are there opportunities to generate employment within these initiatives?”.

Whilst acknowledging that a paid role instead of a volunteer position for a current or former client is not possible in every case, or even in many cases, we believe this principle sets an important tone, providing a potential route out of poverty, and valuing the expertise of people with lived experience who should be supported to share that expertise *and* be fairly compensated for it.

Caraher and Furey (2018) reported highlights from FareShare’s 2016/17 annual report that found that £7,900 per annum is the average saving for organisations that it provides food to, thus allowing them to spend those savings on other goods and services. The £216,343 invested in the period generated £1,628,927 of social value over five years equating to a social return on investment (SROI) ratio of £1:£7.53 meaning that for every £1 invested approximately £8 of social and economic value was returned (GaugeNI, 2014).

The NI SROI report identified the greatest impacts (£493,815.45; 56%) for the service users, delivering mental and physical health outcomes including feelings of inclusivity and belonging, and sustenance in respect of hot and varied meals reflective of the Eatwell Guide. Volunteers were secondary beneficiaries of the impacts (£273,245.59; 31%) with benefits relating to learning valuable professional and personal life skills, progression to paid employment, forming new friendships and learning more about healthy diets. Community food members (recipient organisations) were tertiary beneficiaries (receiving £90,361.19 or 10% of the overall impacts) through efficiency savings from food donations that they would have otherwise had to spend to procure. Food industry suppliers ranked fourth in the benefits accrued (£17,627; 2%) due mainly to reduced carbon dioxide emissions, reduction in food waste and increased staff morale as a result of volunteering. Finally, the environmental impact was determined to equate to £4,518.37, deduced by diverting 86 tonnes of food waste and 360 tonnes of carbon emissions, with additional benefits itemised as reduced food mileage and more administration efficiencies in the reverse supply chain due to there being no need to return unused food stocks. The SROI evaluation did identify an unintended consequence related to the potential for service users to develop a dependency or expectation for continual access to this food source. Clients commented that reduced choice in meals and uncertainty around snacks would contribute to stress and anxiety if the food supply was interrupted or ceased.

- **Consider and make recommendations on how success will be measured addressing the need identified and desired outcomes.**

Charitable food aid is not the answer to eradicate food insecurity. We need to **address the underlying causes of (food) insecurity** through wider policy solutions, for example, a fit for purpose benefits system that maintains pace with inflation and retains the £20 uplift and other Welfare Mitigation, Right to Food legislation, cash-first approach, commitment to and promotion of the Real Living Wage, extension of eligibility and (universal) provision of free school meals, healthy start vouchers, breakfast clubs, school holiday food provision and exploration of Universal Basic Income.



**Advocate for a cash-first approach** to bolstering people's incomes (income maximisation through work that pays locally, increased support for people to set up their own business and ongoing promotion of local industry since towns and villages within the CCG catchment have very limited industry and councillors should actively encourage more and fairly paid jobs locally; alongside a fit for purpose welfare system that provides an adequate safety net for those unable to work).

CCG could **investigate/pilot other models for low-cost food provision** (eg) community food hubs. Councillors should encourage initiatives with local retailers to make healthy food more affordable.

All actors to **ask for financial donations and not food donations** so that any support in-kind may enable and empower clients to afford and choose their own food with dignity.

CCG's two SSMs are mutually supportive, and it is the recommendation of this research that **both SSMs are required to offer the accessibility so needed by the prospective client base from both urban and rural environs**. Additionally, the programmes should be designed with sufficient flexibility to accommodate the individual needs of each client via more reactive / responsive/dynamic/lighter/more in-depth tailored versions – the tapering or extension of programme support should be made possible so that clients may progress at a pace sustainable to them.

**Mobile food vans** should be considered for particularly remote or difficult to access locations and locations poorly served by public transport routes. Consideration should also be given to supporting food banks to deliver food to isolated people by funding unbranded vans to respect the privacy and dignity principles while accessing food in this way.

**Grant funding for community sector initiatives should be simplified**, streamlined and standardised so that their workers and volunteers may focus on the more impactful work without being distracted by overly cumbersome administration.

**Community initiatives' buildings to be zero rated for local rates** in order to significantly reduce their operating costs through this cost-of-living crisis.

**Fuel support:** CCG should increase awareness raising of the DfC-funded Fuel Scheme and other fuel support initiatives.

**Lower-cost energy cooking equipment:** There is some support for the provision of air fryers to households as has been done in other council areas for slow cookers. This may be particularly appropriate given the lower running costs of air fryers compared to conventional ovens, which would again be supportive amidst the ongoing cost-of-living/energy crises.

**Help to Save:** CCG should increase awareness of the Government scheme where the government match-funds individuals' savings after three years.

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