

Preliminary findings and reflections for community food organisations from our embedded research

Fair Food Futures UK Study

- The aim of Fair Food Futures UK is to understand the role of community food organisations (CFOs) in addressing food insecurity at a household level, including the types of support provided and the impact on families.
- After exploring what food support is available in Bradford and Tower Hamlets, we undertook embedded research in a diverse range of settings to understand different ways of working and services offered. We chose nine settings, all with different characteristics.
- Between January 2024 and April 2025, we spent a total of 173 days volunteering in community food organisations in Bradford and Tower Hamlets, ranging from 10 to 39 shifts in each.
- During our volunteering, we spent time observing, chatting and asking questions, and writing field notes after each shift. As a team, we have reflected together on our fieldnotes to consider what works well.
- This briefing summarises our findings so far based on our long-term involvement volunteering as embedded researchers and includes advice for CFOs.

What works well - based on our observations

We recognise the importance of community food organisations in supporting families living in their communities. We are also aware of different models and ways of working across community food organisations. For example, some are designed to give people choice and may require a small payment (like food pantries). Others provide families with a pre-packed food parcel, and some provide cooking facilities and ingredients so that families can prepare their own meals. We understand that community food organisations face significant challenges in providing food and support beyond food. We are also aware that third sector organisations, like charities and community centres, are finding access to long term funding increasingly challenging, and this impacts their ability to sustain staff and activity levels. Below, we highlight examples of what we think works well, based on our observations.

1. Food

We observed extraordinary examples of commitment to providing food which meets the needs of the diverse communities seeking support. This, in some cases, was achieved by securing additional funding (and suppliers) to offer a balanced mix of fresh and frozen

food, including eggs, milk, meat, fruits and vegetables, and to meet special dietary requirements (e.g. gluten free) or cultural preference (e.g. providing big bags of Basmati rice). Although fairness in food support provision can be very difficult to achieve, we observed creative ways to balance consistency in offer, fairness and equity, e.g. adopting a rota to give everyone the chance to be 'first in the queue', or having a system so that large families can automatically receive extra food, with no need to ask for it. Food is not just about nutrition and health, and during our volunteering we witnessed seasonal or cultural celebrations, where food was put at the heart of sharing knowledge about heritage and traditions.

We observed examples of customised service, such as taking orders and arranging home delivery for people who are housebound and/or offering food that does not need to be cooked (for people who have no cooking facilities).

2. Spaces

We noticed the positive impact of providing warm and welcoming spaces, where people can chat and socialise, in some cases with the offer of a warm drink, snack or meal; and even an area with toys for children to play with. We also noticed that having a designated person to greet people as they arrive, to explain where they need to go and what they need to do to access the food and/or other services on offer, contributes to helping people navigate the space. A 'human touch' and special attention to details (gifts for festivities, preparation of recipe boxes) make some spaces particularly welcoming. People seem to appreciate opportunities for one-to-one conversations with a member of staff or advisor, in a private space or corner.

3. Relationships

Volunteers and paid staff play a vital role in making people feel welcome. We observed that, where everyone has a deep understanding of the vulnerabilities experienced by people accessing support (either through lived experience or training), staff and volunteers always interact with exceptional sensitivity. Time for interactions is essential to build trust. Where the service is designed and run to allow sufficient time for meaningful engagement, we observed that people accessing food support have the opportunity to express their wider needs and to then be signposted to other kinds of support. In some settings, volunteers have previous experience of food insecurity themselves and can offer support on specific issues. Many volunteers do not have previous lived experience but are passionate about 'giving back' to their community, and in many cases have volunteered at the settings for a number of years.

4. Support beyond food

We observed numerous examples of support 'beyond food'. This includes offering co-located access to advice services (e.g. support with housing, bills, benefits), language courses, employment support or help with fuel. We became aware that community food organisations often work in partnerships or establish informal relationships with multiple agencies and services. For example, in some settings,

representatives from adult social care, early education services, dentistry or the police pay regular visits to reach out to people accessing the provision and offer support and information. We also observed many examples of people previously using the service becoming volunteers. Some were supported to learn new skills and access training, beyond their volunteering role, which improved their mental health and/or employability.

5. Processes

We observed examples of effective processes to recruit and train volunteers (e.g. clear definitions of roles and responsibilities, volunteer training packs) as well as systems for managing sessions (e.g. dedicated app for volunteers to sign up for shifts). Where systems are in place, volunteers seem to have a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities, including how to identify people's wider needs and how best to support them. We observed volunteers receiving a clear induction, being asked to sign a volunteer agreement, being trained around safeguarding protocols and other key policies, being given briefings at the start of sessions, receiving regular training, being provided with easy access to up-to-date information, leaflets and other resources to facilitate signposting; and staff and volunteers wearing name badges to promote positive interactions.

Ideas and suggestions

We recognise that organisations have developed particular ways of working over time, based on their circumstances and experience. Making changes can be difficult even when there is a willingness to do so. Based on what we have observed to work well, we suggest that organisations could try some of the following, if relevant and if they are not already doing so.

1. Food

- Maximise opportunities for people to exercise choice around food. For example, food banks could allow clients to select items from a list before collecting, or offer food swaps after collection. Food pantries should aim to allow members to choose food items in the style of a shop.
- Consistently provide fresh fruit and vegetables to help families who are struggling to access healthy and good quality food or explore voucher schemes with local fruit and vegetable providers (groceries and markets)
- Aim to meet dietary requirements and cultural preferences of the people using the service - find out what these are and explore ways to meet them, for example by using new/additional providers (e.g. Asian food stores) which in turn will help to support the local economy.
- Ensure appropriate food provision is available for people who have no cooking facilities (e.g. bread, fruit, kettle food, fruit).
- Identify and train a health and safety lead to make sure the space is always clean and safe to store food as well as ensuring safe working conditions.

- Avoid food waste by undertaking regular stock checks and communicating with food suppliers about food demand and people's preferences (e.g. avoiding a build-up of food that people don't buy or want).

2. Spaces

- Arrange the physical space to create a welcoming, safe, comfortable and warm environment for all staff, volunteers and people accessing support; for example, a comfortable waiting area, a warm drink where possible and a play space for children.
- Provide a separate space or room where people know they can have a confidential conversation with a staff member or volunteer if needed.

3. Relationships and communication

- Ensure staff and volunteers are fully aware of the importance of sensitivity and care in interactions with people using their services, for example, by providing regular opportunities for training and reflection around unconscious bias, organisational values and communication styles.
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- Organise provision so that there is always someone available to talk to about people's wider needs and that they are aware of this, for example, by having a dedicated person to greet people as they come in who asks how people are.
- Put strategies in place to overcome language barriers, for example, keeping a list of which languages are spoken by staff and volunteers, and providing access to the internet to allow use of free translation software.
- Create a welcome leaflet or poster and make use of social media to share essential information about food on offer (for example, opening days/times and access criteria).
- Regularly invite people accessing the services, as well as volunteers, to share their views about the food and any additional services provided; adapt the provision where appropriate and communicate any changes to people.

4. Support beyond food

- If support beyond food is available, be clear and consistent about how to access it, making use of a range of communication strategies (posters and digital resources). Ensure information provided is up to date, and, where possible, available in different languages.
- If no additional support is available on site, provide up-to-date information on where to go for different kinds of support, and when and how to access this (e.g. leaflets about advice services).
- Consider working in partnership with agencies providing other services and develop models of signposting, cross-referrals and/or co-location of services. This could be done by joining (or strengthening) an existing network of community food organisations or advice agencies which are already working in these ways.

5. Processes

- Ensure all volunteers and staff are aware and up-to-date on eligibility criteria and rules at your organisation, so that they can apply them consistently. Ensure they are aware of new initiatives or services available. This could be done through a regular briefing at the start of each session.
- Ensure there are clear guidelines on how to raise safeguarding concerns about a person's wellbeing or circumstances, for example, during the induction of staff and volunteers and through regular training, reflection or debriefing sessions.
- Only collect personal data and confidential information if strictly necessary.
- If personal data are collected and confidential information disclosed, ensure volunteers and staff are trained to securely manage personal data and sensitively engage in conversations to avoid re-traumatizing people accessing the service.
- Provide a debriefing for volunteers at the end of sessions, and/or regular one-to-one or group supervision/support sessions, so they can share any concerns or suggestions and reflect together on what works well.

Please share your thoughts with us!

We are keen to hear your thoughts on this briefing. Does it resonate with your own experiences? Please share your feedback with us at Giorgia.Previdoli@york.ac.uk, Wendy.Burton@york.ac.uk or Rachel.Benchekroun@ucl.ac.uk. This will help us develop a toolkit by the end of the year that can be shared with community food organisations across the UK and with local and national policy makers.

Thank you!



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