

The Community Food Bus Evaluation

Interim Report

28th February 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In 2020, ERS was commissioned by project partners from the Community Food Bus to evaluate the pilot phase of the project.
- The Community Food Bus is an innovative model with ambitious aims of reducing food insecurity and improving community health and wellbeing across pilot areas in two London boroughs. The project involves a refurbished and converted double-decker bus which provides access to fresh produce and other ambient and refrigerated food items, a café, a seating area, and wider support and training services for local residents.
- The place-based project is a direct response to local community challenges and priorities, as identified by project partners. The project has the potential to impact positively upon local communities and contribute to several local and national policy priorities.
- This interim report assesses the project's progress to date. Despite several challenges, relating to the practical issues of delivering the project and the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project team have been able to establish pilot areas for the Bus's regular remit, and have begun to embed the project within the local community. During this pilot phase, membership of the project peaked at 100 households.
- The project is founded upon longer-term ambitions in relation to reducing food insecurity and creating a new community space in the local areas on the Bus route. Early signs of progress towards these goals are evidenced in this report.
- Only a small sample of members engaged with the survey as part of this evaluation. However, those who did respond perceived the Community Food Bus as a positive initiative in their local communities. Responses were broadly positive in relation to aspects of product choice and the impact of the Bus upon healthy eating habits or social connectedness.
- Although the majority of members who completed the survey did not report themselves or their households as food insecure, it was felt that the Bus improved affordability and access to healthier food choices for low-income households or vulnerable individuals in these communities more generally.
- Evidence from the small sample of members who completed our survey was mixed. However, there is tentative evidence to suggest that, in the early stages, some progress has been made towards achieving the project's longer-term ambitions to impact positively upon local communities' health and wellbeing and to provide new community spaces to geographically-disadvantaged communities in London. The pilot continues to influence learning for project partners alongside other similar projects across the UK.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Community Food Bus

- 1.1 The Community Food Bus is an innovative pilot project involving a converted double-decker bus which aims to improve access to affordable and nutritious food alongside providing wider community services to residents in two London boroughs.
- 1.2 The project is the result of a collaboration between the following organisations:
 - **Feeding Britain** – a charity which coordinates and supports local and national pilot projects across the UK, alongside campaigning for systemic changes to alleviate hunger and food insecurity.
 - **Be Enriched** – a South-London based charity which organises and delivers community-based food projects such as community canteens, healthy holiday clubs for school children and families, and redistribution of high-quality surplus food.
 - **Wandsworth Food Partnership** – a network of people campaigning for change to create a stronger and healthier food system in Wandsworth.
 - **Jan Kattein Architects** – a London-based architectural company which oversaw the design and refurbishment of the double-decker bus.
 - **Building BloQs** – a London-based fabricator which led on the manufacturing of the Community Food Bus space as designed by architects.



- 1.3 The innovative project received £120,000 from Round 2 of the **Mayor of London's Good Growth Fund**¹, a £70 million regeneration programme for community-based projects in London. This funding was used to refurbish the Bus to make it fit for purpose.
- 1.4 The Community Food Bus space was carefully and purposefully designed by **Jan Kattein Architects**, with the designs being transformed into reality with manufacturing and fabrication support from

¹ Greater London Authority (2020) Good Growth Fund supported projects. <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/regeneration/funding-opportunities/good-growth-fund-supporting-regeneration-london/good-growth-fund-supported-projects>

Building BloQs. A double-decker bus was purchased and repurposed to incorporate a social supermarket on the ground floor, and further space for a café and seating area on the top deck for customers to relax, spend time with others, and access training events and wider support services. The Bus also has onboard kitchen facilities and a refrigeration system for storing fresh produce.

1.5 The project also relies on support from wider local organisations and aims to build upon existing connections within local communities. For example, food is sourced locally from wholesalers', growers' and retailers' surplus stock, while connections with local schools and housing associations have enabled the project to reach a wider audience within the local communities it serves.

1.6 The Community Food Bus project has been endorsed by local stakeholders including several local councillors². The project was officially launched in November 2021 by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, with a range of local MPs and stakeholders also present and lending their support to the project.



Project Objectives

1.7 A key purpose of the Community Food Bus project is to pilot an innovative model which brings new physical spaces to communities in an effort to **overcome geographical disadvantage**. Rather than existing models which require a physical space, such as a community centre or church, the Bus enables nutritious and affordable food and other services to be provided to communities which may lack access to such spaces.

1.8 At the heart of the project is an aim of **reducing reliance upon emergency food aid** in deprived and disadvantaged areas. Low-income households may be forced to rely upon foodbanks and other food services which can be stigmatising and reduce individuals' control and choice over their diet. However, the membership model which provides goods for a significantly reduced cost allows customers to maintain choice over the food they receive, improving their access to a range of food choices, and reducing the stigma of accessing food charity services. The intention is that the Bus will help to build resilience and assist people back onto their feet after a crisis, or act as a preventative intervention before people reach a crisis situation.

1.9 A further objective, alongside providing affordable food, is to **improve access to a wider range of nutritious and culturally-appropriate foods**. For example, during Black History Month in 2021, the team hosted a Caribbean fruit tasting workshop to children aboard the Bus. The Bus also provides healthier options, such as fruit smoothies, as an alternative to existing 'fast food'.

1.10 The Community Food Bus also deliberately targets areas known to be '**food swamps**' (areas which have a high density of unhealthy food outlets) and '**food deserts**' (areas which have low access to

² Wandsworth Community Food Bus (2018) Good Growth Fund 2018 Proposal. https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Food-Bus_FeedingBritain_Appendix-1_Designbrochure-4.pdf

affordable, nutritious foods), providing a range of fruit and vegetables including those which are not readily available or affordable at existing shops.

1.11 The upper-deck seating area and onboard kitchen facilities allow for healthy cooking demonstrations and other training and skills sessions and events to be held, contributing to wider aims of **supporting wellbeing and embedding healthy habits**. There are aims to embed more of these sessions as the delivery of the project progresses.

1.12 The Community Food Bus project also aims to improve the wellbeing of individuals and **strengthen connections within local communities**, tackling loneliness and social isolation. The café and seating area on the upper deck provides a new space for local people to relax and interact with each other.

1.13 More broadly, bringing a new physical space which acts as a **'community hub'** to localities lacking such spaces, the project aims to promote a sense of community belonging and encourage local people to come together over food and other activities. There are also intentions to create and build upon connections between local residents and wider support organisations. The space on the second deck of the Bus allows for the presence of wider support services, with plans for organisations such as Citizens Advice and local authority substance abuse teams to provide support².

1.14 The innovative project aims to pilot a **sustainable and ethical model** for achieving these wider objectives. The Bus itself has been designed to incorporate features which reduce its carbon emissions, including a refrigeration system powered by solar panels, and food is sourced using local, sustainable supply chains. The use of a low-cost membership scheme enables the project team to cover staff and stock costs whilst maintaining affordable prices for customers.



Geographical Remit and Bus Route

- 1.15 An initial scoping exercise took place in 2019 to determine the remit and coverage of the Community Food Bus project. The pilot phase has enabled each of these aspects to be tested and, where necessary, amended or optimised.
- 1.16 The Community Food Bus currently spans two London boroughs, Wandsworth and Lambeth. The Food Bus makes weekly visits at four stops within these two areas.
- **Roehampton** (Danebury Avenue Green)
 - **Stockwell and Kennington** (Henry Fawcett School & Allen Edwards School)
 - **Tooting** (All Saints Church)
- 1.17 Geographical locations for the bus were determined using a range of factors. This included measures of deprivation, the existence of ‘food swamps’ and ‘food deserts’, and a lack of other community spaces.
- 1.18 Early into the operational pilot of the project, other factors were considered when determining the locations where the Community Food Bus will stop. This included, for instance, local organisational buy-in from schools who granted access to the Bus during school drop-off and pick-up times, or from local housing associations who agreed to market the service to their tenants.

The Food Delivery Van

- 1.19 In recognition that some people may not be able to physically access the Bus, including individuals who are disabled or elderly or those with mental health issues, plans were also outlined to trial a home delivery van service².
- 1.20 The initial proposal for the Food Delivery Van service was to deliver low-cost food to housebound customers identified by community partners. Alongside delivering the food, volunteers would also spend some time with individuals who may be socially isolated, providing companionship, support and information.
- 1.21 However, this service was offered to all customers in late 2021, acting as an interim service whilst the Community Food Bus underwent mechanical repairs. As such, members who had previously used the Community Food Bus were able to order a food delivery to their home address.



2. NATIONAL AND LOCAL POLICY CONTEXT

Wellbeing, Health and Nutrition

- 2.1 Wellbeing is a multifaceted experience which incorporates domains of physical, mental, social, and cultural health. Whilst food and nutrition are important aspects of wellbeing and can contribute towards physical and mental health, the Community Food Bus project also aims to impact upon wider issues including members' sense of social connectedness and community belonging.
- 2.2 Public Health England has acknowledged the importance of place-based approaches for reducing health inequalities³. Such approaches account for individual differences (such as demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and individual beliefs regarding health) as well as geographical factors and contexts which influence opportunities for good health (such as access to green spaces or healthy food outlets). The Community Food Bus project takes account of both dimensions, aiming to improve the ability of individuals to access healthy food and to make healthier choices.
- 2.3 There is general guidance for individuals relating to dietary intake. For example, the NHS recommendation that adults and children should eat at least five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables each day is well known amongst the general public⁴. However, research shows that a healthy, balanced diet is not equally accessible for all. For example, a 2020 report found that, in order to follow the NHS's Eatwell Guide, the poorest 10 per cent of UK households would need to spend over 70 per cent of their disposable income, compared to just 6 per cent for the wealthiest decile of households⁵.
- 2.4 National strategies have highlighted the importance of embedding lifelong healthy living habits for families and children, beginning in the early years stages and providing knowledge and skills to children and families through initiatives such as the Change4Life and BetterHealth campaign, which focuses on tackling obesity through changing health behaviours⁶.
- 2.5 Wider models which acknowledge the social and cultural dimensions of food intake have also been encouraged. Whilst a healthy diet can benefit health through providing optimum nutrition, the sharing of food and participating in cultural traditions can also contribute to wider wellbeing and social connection⁷.
- 2.6 The importance of high-quality nutrition, alongside the importance of these wider aspects of food as a social and cultural phenomenon, are acknowledged and promoted in the Community Food Bus model. Through the provision of a new community space for wider activities, events and training courses, the Community Food Bus has the potential to impact upon individual and community health and wellbeing.

³ Public Health England (2021) Guidance: Place-based approaches for reducing health inequalities.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-inequalities-place-based-approaches-to-reduce-inequalities/place-based-approaches-for-reducing-health-inequalities-main-report>

⁴ NHS (2018) Eat Well Guide: 5 A Day Portion Sizes. <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/5-a-day-portion-sizes/#:~:text=Everyone%20should%20have%20at%20least,fruit%20and%20vegetables%20a%20day>

⁵ Institute of Health Equity (2020) Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On.

<https://www.instituteoftheequity.org/resources-reports/marmot-review-10-years-on-the-marmot-review-10-years-on-full-report.pdf>

⁶ NHS UK (2022) Better Health Healthier Families. <https://www.nhs.uk/healthier-families/>

⁷ The Association of UK Dietitians (2022) Cultural Diets and the need for diversity in dietetics. <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/cultural-diets-and-the-need-for-diversity-in-dietetics.html>

Food Insecurity and Food Poverty

- 2.7 Despite the importance placed upon achieving a healthy and balanced diet, there are local inequalities across the UK in relation to access to sufficient and high-quality food. Several terms such as ‘*food poverty*’, ‘*food insecurity*’ and ‘*hunger*’ may be used interchangeably to describe this issue⁸. These concepts may refer to different aspects of a complex social phenomenon, although there is no single universally accepted definition.
- 2.8 A recent UK Parliament research briefing defined ‘food insecurity’ as situations where a household ‘cannot (or are uncertain about whether they can) acquire an adequate quality of sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways’⁹. This definition incorporates multiple factors, including the ability to access and afford food, as well as the social stigma often associated with obtaining food through foodbanks or other such schemes. However, other factors include the ability to prepare food, which requires the equipment and energy supply to store and prepare the food, alongside the skills and knowledge on how to prepare healthy and nutritious meals.
- 2.9 The 2020 Agriculture Act¹⁰ introduced a new requirement upon the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to report upon UK food security at least once every three years, alongside existing reporting to Parliament. This report assesses up-to-date statistics on food security and food insecurity and reports upon trends and potential policy implications¹¹. According to the latest government figures from 2021, 92% of UK households rated themselves as food secure in the financial year between 2019 and 2020¹¹. Of the 8% of households who reported themselves as food insecure, 4% reported experiencing low food security and a further 4% reported very low food security.
- 2.10 Research is clear that food insecurity is disproportionately experienced by certain groups and is unevenly spread according to broader factors including geographical differences, poverty, ethnicity, age, and disability¹¹. These factors may also interact with each other, meaning that multiple strategies are necessary to tackle food insecurity. For instance, those living in poverty may be unable to afford food or the necessary equipment to prepare it despite having the knowledge and skills to prepare meals, whereas individuals living in rural areas without access to appropriate public or private transport may lack access to food due to geographical constraints.
- 2.11 A 2020 report published by the Institute of Health Equity highlights that food insecurity, which was already a significant issue, has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent policy response¹². The report points to rising levels of child poverty and child food poverty, including an increase in children eligible for Free School Meals from 1.4 million to 1.9 million in the period between January and April 2020¹².
- 2.12 There are some national strategies which attempt to address the issue of food insecurity. For example, the Healthy Start scheme proposes to alleviate food poverty by providing low-income families with

⁸ The Trussell Trust (2021) State of Hunger: Building the evidence on poverty, destitution, and food insecurity in the UK: Year Two Main Report. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/05/State-of-Hunger-2021-Report-Final.pdf>

⁹ UK Parliament (2021) Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9209/>

¹⁰ Agriculture Act (2020) S19. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2020/21/section/19/enacted>

¹¹ Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2021) United Kingdom Food Security Report. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1041623/United_Kingdom_Food_Security_Report_2021_16dec2021b.pdf

¹² Institute of Health Equity (2020) Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review. <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review>

vouchers to spend on food for their infants and young children¹³. However, evidence suggests that eligibility for this programme fell by 20% between 2014 and 2018 due to changes to eligibility criteria and the effects of alterations to other welfare benefits such as Universal Credit¹². In 2022, Healthy Start moved from paper vouchers to a digital scheme, requiring all eligible households to re-register.

- 2.13 There is also a growing demand upon food banks and other emergency food distribution projects across the UK which has also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020-21, the Trussell Trust supplied over 2.5 million three-day emergency food parcels, reporting a rise of 33% in demand compared to the previous year⁹. A significant proportion, 40% of these parcels, went to children. According to research from the Trussell Trust, 421,426 food parcels were distributed by food banks in the Trussell Trust network across London in 2020-21¹⁴.
- 2.14 However, strategies which include food vouchers or food banks may be associated with stigma and embarrassment and may remove choice from individuals who are forced to rely upon them⁸. Conversely, the Community Food Bus runs on a reduced-cost membership model, enabling everyone including those on low-incomes to access affordable and nutritious food without the stigma.

Local Policy Context

- 2.15 The Community Food Bus, also referred to as the London Food Bus, currently serves areas across two London boroughs: Wandsworth and Lambeth. The project was designed to reflect local community priorities, as identified by project partners.
- 2.16 In 2018, the Mayor of London announced the London Food Strategy¹⁵, a five-year plan which outlines key priorities for ensuring that all Londoners have access to healthy, affordable, and sustainable food. The Community Food Bus is likely to contribute towards achieving several of these aims, including:
- **Good food at home and reducing food insecurity** – through ensuring that low-income households have better access to high-quality food including throughout the school holidays.
 - **Good food economy, shopping, and eating out** – by providing healthy food for families eating out (such as healthy smoothies for schoolchildren) and ensuring that areas identified as ‘food deserts’ and ‘food swamps’ are given access to healthier options.
 - **Good food in community settings and public institutions** – through aiming to bring people together in local communities over food and other social activities in order to reduce social isolation.
 - **Good food for pregnancy and childhood** – by ensuring that schoolchildren and their families are given access to affordable nutritious food and encouraging healthy eating habits, and by accepting Healthy Start vouchers on the Bus.
 - **Good food for the environment** – by adopting a sustainable model which reduces food waste whilst providing high-quality produce, and through efforts to ensure that the Bus itself is ‘greener’.

¹³ NHS (2022) Healthy Start Scheme. <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/how-to-apply/>

¹⁴ The Trussell Trust (2021) End of Year Stats. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>

¹⁵ Greater London Authority (2018) The London Food Strategy. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final_london_food_strategy.pdf

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- 2.17 Wandsworth Council's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment¹⁶ identifies several public health challenges relating to nutrition and diet. For females aged 5-14 resident in Wandsworth and London more broadly, iron deficiency relating to dietary intake accounted for the fifth greatest proportion of burden of disease. In 2018, 1 in 6 pupils in Wandsworth were eligible and claiming for Free School Meals. This rate of 15.4% is higher than the English average of 13.5% of children. This suggests that a proportion of Wandsworth families may struggle to access high-quality nutrition, particularly in the school holidays when they do not have access to Free School Meals.
- 2.18 Similarly, the most recent Wandsworth Local Health & Care Plan¹⁷ identifies several local priorities relating to nutrition and health as a means of preventing wider public health problems. For example, there is a focus upon encouraging children and families to make healthier food choices in order to tackle wider issues such as child obesity. These strategic priorities overlap with several of the Community Food Bus objectives.
- 2.19 Lambeth Council recently published a Food Poverty and Insecurity Action Plan for the locality which sets out strategic priorities for tackling these issues between 2021 and 2024¹⁸. This document outlines the increased demand for emergency food packages driven by the pandemic. The policy also highlights that that burden of food poverty is disproportionately experienced by certain demographic groups within the Lambeth population, including low-income households, ethnic minority groups, elderly people, disabled people, and people with mental health issues.
- 2.20 The Community Food Bus, which serves some areas within Lambeth Council such as Stockwell & Kennington's schools, is likely to contribute towards efforts to tackle issues such as holiday hunger¹⁹ and food insecurity in the area. By bringing food directly into communities, the Bus may better serve the needs of those with mobility issues such as disabled people and elderly people, who are at greater risk of food insecurity. Furthermore, by stocking culturally appropriate foods, the Bus aims to meet the needs of ethnic minority groups.

¹⁶ Wandsworth London Borough Council (2021) Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.

https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/media/9890/wandsworth_jsna_overview.pdf

¹⁷ South West London Health & Care Partnership (2019) Wandsworth Local Health & Care Plan 2019-2021.

https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/media/5565/wandsworth_health_care_plan_welcome.pdf#:~:text=The%20Wandsworth%20Health%20and%20Care%20Plan%20is%20one,South%20West%20London%20to%20improve%20health%20and%20wellbeing

¹⁸ Lambeth London Borough Council (2021) Lambeth Food Poverty and Insecurity Action Plan 2021-2024.

<https://beta.lambeth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-01/Lambeth%20Food%20Poverty%20and%20Insecurity%20action%20plan%20final%20draft.pdf>

¹⁹ Lambeth Labour (2021) Lambeth Labour acts on holiday hunger and child poverty. <https://www.lambeth-labour.org.uk/2021/02/12/lambeth-labour-acts-on-holiday-hunger-and-child-poverty/>

3. METHODOLOGY

Documentary Analysis

- 3.1 This report draws upon existing documents relating to the Community Food Bus project, including the 2018 London Growth Fund proposal² and a short 2020 interim report produced by Wandsworth Food Power²⁰.
- 3.2 Due to the community-led approach, social media is an important aspect of marketing and public engagement. The Twitter and Instagram pages (@LdnFoodBus) for the Community Food Bus provided insight into the journey of the project and the challenges faced by the project delivery team.

Consultation with Stakeholders

- 3.3 Consultations with stakeholders involved in the project also contributed towards the findings of this interim report. This included discussions with the following individuals:

- Kemi Akinola – CEO and founder, Be Enriched
- Anna Sjovorr-Packham – Food Bus and Community Engagement Manager, Be Enriched
- Rose Bray – Project Manager, Feeding Britain

Surveys with Community Food Bus Members

- 3.4 The open-access membership model of the Community Food Bus allows customers to register using a short online form to provide contact details. In attempting to engage with members, consideration was given to issues including digital exclusion. It was agreed that text or phone call would be the best method to initially contact members.
- 3.5 ERS made efforts to contact 25 members of the Community Food Bus, with details being provided by the project team from the database of members. 12 of these individuals were contacted through an initial text message followed by a phone call, with only two of these contacts leading to a completed survey. The remaining 13 were contacted via email and offered the option to carry out an e-survey via SurveyMonkey. Three further contacts were uncontactable due to issues with email or phone numbers.
- 3.6 Due to the lack of engagement via telephone, the survey was transferred to an e-survey which could be completed in the participants' own timeframes. The link to the survey was sent to participants' email addresses which gathered a further four responses to a total of six.
- 3.7 However, of the six members who completed a survey, one of these individuals had only accessed the food delivery van service which ran in lieu of the Community Food Bus in early 2022 due to the Bus being in the garage for mechanical works. This individual's responses are included in the overall report commentary, but not in the analysis of the Community Food Bus.
- 3.8 In order to incentivise the survey and reimburse respondents for their time and effort, all survey respondents were offered the opportunity to claim a £10 credit voucher which could be spent on items on the Community Food Bus or home delivery van service.

²⁰ Wandsworth Food Power (2020) Wandsworth Community Food Bus Interim Report October 2020.
<https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/reports/Wandsworth-community-food-bus-2020.pdf>

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- 3.9 Engagement with members to distribute the telephone and e-survey was constrained by several limitations, including the disruption to the Community Food Bus schedule during the active period of the survey.
- 3.10 The survey included a range of questions designed to measure the regularity and duration of use of the Community Food Bus, alongside experiences of the product choice and affordability. Impacts upon health, dietary intake, and wider aspects of wellbeing including community belonging and social connection were also assessed. The survey also incorporated two qualitative questions to allow for wider comments on members' experiences of using the Community Food Bus or the impact it may have had upon their circumstances.
- 3.11 The survey also incorporated eight questions from the pre-validated United Nations Food Insecurity Experience Scale Survey Module (FIES-SM)²¹. These eight questions focus upon respondents' experiences of food insecurity and are specifically designed to allow for global comparison and reference of the severity of this phenomenon. The survey has several advantages, having been specifically designed to be relatively short to complete, easily integrated into wider surveys to allow for a multi-dimensional measurement of food insecurity, and provide actionable information for policymakers. However, it is also crucial that these eight questions are analysed together rather than being treated as separate components, and this is reflected in the analysis section.

²¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2022) The Food Insecurity Experience Scale. <https://www.fao.org/in-action/voices-of-the-hungry/fies/en/>

4. CHALLENGES FOR PROJECT PARTNERS

The Double-Decker Bus

- 4.1 Due to the innovative nature of the project, which has been described as the first of its kind by organisers, the project team faced several unprecedented challenges when trying to implement the proposal.
- 4.2 For instance, organisers were initially unsure which insurance status the Bus would require. Similarly, there were issues in recruiting suitable drivers. Drivers were required not only to hold a current HGV licence, but also to have the personal characteristics necessary to create a warm and welcoming environment for customers. This process of recruitment took considerable time. However, the team now has two regular drivers who have also supported with other tasks when the Bus was out of operation. One driver is on a part-time employment contract, whereas the other is employed on a flexible contract but typically works three days a week when the Bus is operating to its usual schedule.
- 4.3 In May 2021, the Bus passed its MOT and began undertaking a regular route across Lambeth and Wandsworth. However, mechanical faults in December 2021 meant that the regular schedule was disrupted for almost three months, with the Food Delivery Van service operating in lieu of the Bus. These mechanical faults, largely due to the nature of the vehicle and the added difficulty in sourcing parts for repairs, has led to major disruption to the Bus's regular schedule, which is expected to return in early March 2022.

"I think the main challenge has been trying to establish ourselves in communities when the bus has been really inconsistent. I'm hoping it will come back and have no mechanical problems for months so we can tell everyone we will be there every week. It really has been detrimental to relationships with customers and our contacts in each area. I'm anticipating we will have to almost start from scratch when the Bus gets back on the road which is a real shame, but hopefully we can hit the road quickly and it will be consistent." – Anna, Be Enriched

- 4.4 Unfortunately, the Bus was also vandalised in June 2021 when parked in its regular station in Tooting. A community fundraiser on GoFundMe launched in aid of Be Enriched and project partners raised over £1000, revealing the perceived benefit of the project to the local community. A new, secure parking spot was also found for storing the Bus in between its regular operating hours. This was provided at no cost by Hadley Property Group.

"Getting to this point has not been without its challenges, especially after the Bus was recently vandalised, but we are so thankful for the funding from the [Greater London Authority] and everyone's support." – Kemi, Be Enriched

- 4.5 In delivering the project, organisers also had to be aware of several geographical factors affecting the suitability of the Bus for operation in certain areas. For example, partners highlighted that due to the size of the Bus, it was not suitable for all communities, including those with narrow roads or a lack of suitable parking spaces. This has been taken into account for future replications based on this pilot model in other parts of the UK. Feeding Britain have now supported the launch of a second double-

decker Food Bus in Sheppey, Kent, and have plans for a third in South Shields. However, in other areas they have used smaller vehicles such as vans or converted library buses depending on the geographical context. The project team have found that strong relationships with community partners have been beneficial in securing suitable space for the Bus and engagement with the service:

“There was one particular council estate which I knew would be successful, but the difficulty was finding somewhere the Bus could park without causing disruption to passing vehicles. We’ve now partnered with Wandsworth Council who have a spot for us to park.” – Anna, Be Enriched

“The aim of the London Food Bus was to pilot a new model, and it’s now taking off with Food Buses elsewhere. It’s also inspired other models, for example using smaller vehicles such as vans which can be less expensive and less complicated, although they don’t offer all the space and facilities of the double-decker model.” – Rose, Feeding Britain

Disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

- 4.6 Project partners were determined to pilot the Community Food Bus as quickly as possible, in an attempt to counter the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on low-income households. However, due to the compact space onboard the Bus, social distancing measures placed huge constraints upon the delivery of the project. For instance, even where social distancing measures allowed for the social supermarket to be open to the public, the café and seating space had to be closed due to limits on social contact given the confined space. In an attempt to adapt, the project team included an outdoor seating area where locations allowed for this.
- 4.7 COVID-19 restrictions and pandemic lockdowns also led to difficulty in establishing a regular customer base in the project’s early stages. Two of the regular stops are outside local schools. School closures meant that engagement with regular customers, largely consisting of parents and carers dropping off or collecting their children from school, was also impacted.
- 4.8 Further to these constraints, some staff were forced to self-isolate and others caught COVID-19, leading to staff shortages which affected the operation of the project.
- 4.9 The Community Food Bus makes partial use of surplus food stocks from local suppliers. As the pandemic forced many local authorities to become more reliant on such systems, there were additional difficulties in accessing these supplies for the project team during the pandemic.
- 4.10 However, in many cases the pandemic highlighted the need for place-based projects such as the Community Food Bus in order to reduce the negative impacts of pandemic-related inequalities upon local communities. As such, although the pandemic has led to many delays and challenges for the project team, they have also managed to adapt to these challenges, deliver a vital service for residents, and are optimistic that progress will be made in the longer-term.

“The van service has been well-received by the people who have utilised it. Those who do have used it most weeks... It was good to be able to offer something to people, especially over Christmas when covid was kicking off again and people were a bit apprehensive about leaving the house.” – Anna, Be Enriched

The Food Delivery Van Service

- 4.11 Originally, the van home delivery service was intended to provide food to residents who were housebound or could not physically access the Bus.
- 4.12 However, it was felt that many residents valued being able to choose their own products rather than receive a delivery of unknown items for a reduced cost. As such, the van service was also piloted as offering a condensed version of the Community Food Bus, in the same regular stops served by the Bus. The project team found that the engagement with this service was more limited, and that the novelty of the double-decker bus was a key factor in ensuring engagement amongst potential customers.

“For the first two weeks of implementing the van, we tried to do a condensed version of the food bus in the standard locations. We found that we were getting nowhere with that – people weren’t approaching us and understandably so. The van isn’t recognisable enough for people to make the correlation between the two services. So we switched to doing a home delivery service for current customers and started that when COVID flared up again, but continued when it was getting a fairly regular engagement.” – Anna, Be Enriched

- 4.13 The van continues to operate a home delivery service at present, offering a reduced-cost food package to a small pool of regular customers.

Progress, Ambitions and Learning

- 4.14 A key objective of the pilot was to engage with local communities and establish a regular customer base by raising awareness of the Community Food Bus. This objective has been significantly delayed by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and mechanical issues with the Bus.
- 4.15 The project team estimate that, when operating to its regular weekly schedule, **the Bus reached a peak of around 100 members. Around 10-12 people regularly accessed the interim weekly food delivery service provided by a van during the winter.**
- 4.16 The project team have made efforts to stay engaged with potential customers, issuing regular communications and updates to those who have provided their contact details using the online membership form. However, the full benefits of the membership model have not yet been fully realised due to these delays and the inconsistency of the Bus’s schedule in the early stages of the pilot.
- 4.17 The Community Food Bus model is an innovative project and has been described as the first of its kind in the UK. Feeding Britain have now replicated this model elsewhere, including the Sheppey Support Bus²². Partners reported that other place-based projects, which respond to the local geographical and social contexts, were likely to take inspiration from the London model.

“It aligns with the Be Enriched core aims and objectives – using food as a way to enhance communities and change the way people think. We’d like to identify if food really is a mechanism for connecting people.” – Kemi, Be Enriched

²² Sheppey Support Bus (2020) <https://sheppeysupportbus.org/>

4.18 There are also longer-term plans to build upon the relationships with partner organisations which have been established in the early stages of the pilot. For example, there are ambitions to increase collaborative working with Stockwell School in order to contribute towards efforts to reduce Holiday Hunger in the area. The foundations for the longer-term ambitions of the project have been established through the connections with local organisations, such as Hyde Group housing association in Kennington, which have contributed towards building relationships with community members. However, these relationships have been more successful in some areas compared to others.

“For example we have a bulk booking with Southwark Council coming up – that’s a few week’s worth of events in specific areas they have highlighted as wanting to trial the service, so we may branch out into more locations. We haven’t got the capacity in the team at the moment to do much more than we’re currently doing, but we’d really like for it to grow and grow. We’d like to offer additional days as well as evenings and weekends so we can open up the service to new groups of people. As we start doing more bespoke bits and pieces on top of our standard service, I’m interested to see how that works.” – Anna, Be Enriched

4.19 Alongside this, there are plans to draw more upon volunteers in the future as the project develops. Although the project team are not currently able to offer significant volunteering opportunities outside of events, an initial engagement strategy has identified a list of contacts of local people with an interest in volunteering with the project.

4.20 Despite the changes to the project timelines and delivery, the project team have adapted to challenges in a way which has enabled some early targets to be realised.

“The long-term vision is for it to be not just about food, but to become a sort of community hub on wheels.” – Rose, Feeding Britain

5. MEMBERS' EXPERIENCES OF ACCESSING THE COMMUNITY FOOD BUS

Accessing the Community Food Bus

- 5.1 All five respondents who completed the survey had been accessing the Community Food Bus for longer than one month. Three of these respondents had accessed the Bus for between one and six months at varying frequencies, whereas one respondent had been accessing the Bus fortnightly for between six and twelve months.
- 5.2 There were variations in how regularly members had been accessing the Bus, ranging from those who accessed it weekly or fortnightly, to those who only occasionally accessed it specifically when they needed to buy something. Some respondents commented that they had no specific routine for accessing the Bus. One respondent noted that they had been accessing the Bus on a weekly basis until disruption due to a mechanical fault.

Diet and Nutrition

- 5.3 All five survey respondents reported that the Community Food Bus provided a good choice of food options.
- 5.4 Some felt that both the Bus and home delivery service provided a wider range of options than existing stores, introducing them to new fruit and vegetables. Two respondents agreed that the Bus provided them with food that they couldn't normally find in local shops, whereas three disagreed. However, one respondent noted that the reduced cost made these food choices more accessible.

"Everything is there which is in other shops so I don't think the choice is any different but the affordability is. I mainly buy fruit and veg." – Community Food Bus Member

- 5.5 Two of the five respondents agreed that the Bus had had a positive impact on the amount of fruit and vegetables they ate, whereas three disagreed.

"I've had two of the packs they bring to your house and the things that I'm getting I've not seen before or know what they're called. I wouldn't have chosen them but I'm still trying them. – Community Food Bus Member

- 5.6 This increased choice of healthy food options was also felt to positively impact on eating habits of the members' children.

"The choice always changes. I have a teenager, I'm not worried about them getting enough food but sometimes I worry they don't eat healthily enough." – Community Food Bus Member

- 5.7 Some respondents commented that being able to access the Bus had enabled them to eat healthier, reducing anxiety related to supermarket shopping or affording healthier options.

"It makes me eat more healthily. Helps with anxiety – easier than going to the supermarket and you can get your basic fruit and veg there." – Community Food Bus Member

*“Dramatically increased the amount and variety of fruit and veg I eat daily. Removed some anxiety about being able to afford good quality nutritious food.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

Food Insecurity

- 5.8 The FIES-SM questions measure respondents’ experiences of food insecurity, exploring self-reported perceptions over the previous twelve-month period. For instance, the survey questions measure whether a lack of money or other resources has forced respondents to restrict the quantity, variety, or frequency of food intake or to eat less healthy and nutritious food, and whether their household has run out of food or went hungry.
- 5.9 Generally, respondents of our survey were not food insecure according to the FIES-SM questionnaire. Only one respondent of five reported food insecurity according to all eight questions. This individual commented that the Community Food Bus removed some anxiety relating to being able to afford healthy food options. The other participants did not rate their household as food insecure according to any of the eight measures in the survey.
- 5.10 Our survey also asked respondents further questions relating to food insecurity. Two out of five respondents reported having used food banks or other similar projects to get food in the previous twelve months. None of the five survey respondents reported having worried about obtaining sufficient food for their children or other household members in the previous twelve months.
- 5.11 However, the survey respondent who accessed the food delivery van service, rather than the Bus, also reported having accessed food banks or other projects, and having worried about having sufficient food for other household members, in the previous twelve months. When this individual is included in the analysis alongside respondents who accessed the Community Food Bus, three out of six respondents had accessed food banks or similar projects in the previous twelve months.
- 5.12 Of the six respondents who completed the survey (including the respondent who had only accessed the van service), four reported that someone in their household was currently working, whereas two reported that nobody in their household was working at present.
- 5.13 Some respondents also reported other vulnerabilities. For instance, four of the five respondents who had accessed the Community Food Bus reported that somebody in their household was affected by mental ill health and two reported that someone in their household was disabled or living with a long-term limiting illness.
- 5.14 It is difficult to make firm conclusions due to the lack of engagement with a representative sample of members. However, these initial findings suggest that the Community Food Bus is accessed by individuals who are food secure, alongside bringing a potential benefit to food insecure households and those living with disabilities and mental ill health. Alternatively, this may simply reflect a lower engagement with the survey amongst food insecure individuals.
- 5.15 Furthermore, several respondents also commented that the produce was affordable in comparison with other providers. As such, they felt that they benefitted from the reduced prices and also felt that this could impact positively on individuals in their communities who were on low incomes and struggling to afford food.

*“The food provided is reasonable, when I buy plantain I get more if I get it there instead of the shop or market so it’s affordable.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

*“Affordability is good, the things you can get there are maybe 4 quid in shops.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

*“Overall a good thing for people who can’t afford things or who are struggling financially as the food is cheaper.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

Wider Impacts upon Wellbeing

- 5.16 Only one participant agreed that they had met new people who live nearby as a result of using the Community Food Bus. However, three out of five participants agreed that the Bus had improved their sense of belonging to the local area. This suggests that, despite being in the early stages of the project delivery, the Bus has already begun to establish itself as a new and alternative community space for individuals in Lambeth and Wandsworth.
- 5.17 Survey respondents were also asked whether the Bus had improved their sense of wellbeing. Two participants agreed, two disagreed, and one responded neutrally to this question.
- 5.18 However, qualitative comments from members suggested some wider positive impacts of accessing the Bus, in relation to reducing anxiety associated with trying to access larger supermarkets and providing a consistent and welcoming space to interact socially with others.

*“Such a wonderful initiative and super friendly and helpful workers make it easy to access and interact.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

*“It brings community belonging because every week they show up.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

- 5.19 Although only one respondent reported having met new people who lived nearby when accessing the Bus, it was often viewed as a space to interact with family and friends. This was particularly true for parents and children, who could spend time in the café when it visited their local area.

*“I think it’s absolutely fabulous, wish I’d known about it years ago. They even have a café upstairs if you want to sit and have a chat. They came to my son’s school which is how I learned about it.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

*“I feel guilty using it as I don’t need it, I can afford to go to supermarkets. But it’s a treat and adventure for my 5 year old.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

*“You can sit down and have a coffee. In the holidays they came one week, my husband took my children to have some breakfast. It’s a good idea and impressive, when my children’s school had summer activities they had lemonade etc. It was pretty popular.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

*“It was just a lovely place to buy nice smoothies for my kids.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

- 5.20 Due to the delays in the progress of the project, it is difficult to assess whether members have been able to access wider support services by using the Bus. However, one respondent suggested that they viewed the Bus as a place to receive wider support through informal conversation with other people they met.

*“I’ve met maybe two more people locally. It’s somewhere I can get wider support maybe just indirectly in conversation.” – **Community Food Bus Member***

The Interim Food Delivery Van

- 5.21 Although the e-survey was aimed at individuals who had accessed the Community Food Bus, one respondent had only accessed the interim food delivery van service which ran in lieu of the Bus due to mechanical problems in early 2022.
- 5.22 Unlike the Bus, where customers could attend and choose their own items, the food delivery van service adopts a home delivery model. Customers are provided with a variety of fresh and ambient items, depending on available stock, for a reduced cost of £5.
- 5.23 This respondent’s data were separated from the original analysis. However, it is worth noting that this individual was interested in accessing the Community Food Bus, although they reported feeling unsure of how to do so.

*“I have only accessed the food bus that delivered goods to your home, so you are never sure what you are actually getting until it turns up. It would be nice to be able to go myself and pick items I need for my family rather than have them delivered but I do not know where a local bus is for me to access this.” – **Food Delivery Van Customer***

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The Community Food Bus is an innovative, place-based model for tackling a range of social issues identified by community organisations. The model is a direct response to challenges identified in the local context and has therefore been deeply shaped by the experiences and priorities of the local communities it serves.
- 6.2 Project partners have faced many challenges relating to the practical aspects of delivering the project, many of which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. This has affected the consistency of the Bus's schedule, which has been particularly detrimental to establishing a presence in local communities in order to build relationships and engage potential customers.
- 6.3 Despite this, partners feel positively that some progress has been made, and that the pilot will continue to meet wider targets including improving community wellbeing and reducing food insecurity in the local area.
- 6.4 Project partners also felt that the pilot's innovative model has directly shaped and influenced other similar projects across the UK and that this learning process will be a useful resource to draw upon as the project develops and adapts to new challenges.
- 6.5 Engagement with members who had accessed the Community Food Bus was limited. This may be due to several challenges, including digital exclusion and social isolation of low-income or food insecure households and the stigma and sensitive nature associated with poverty and food insecurity. The delays to the project's timeline which have also impacted upon efforts to build a regular membership base may also contribute to these challenges. However, despite the small sample size, some conclusions can be drawn about the potential social and financial benefits to local community members.
- 6.6 The majority of respondents reported that they did not access the Community Food Bus due to food insecurity, but rather for the wider benefits the project had to offer. This included, for example, the welcoming space and the range of healthy food options available at reduced-cost prices, as well as the opportunity to socialise with family in the café. However, three out of six respondents using the van delivery service and the Community Food Bus reported having accessed food banks or other similar projects in the previous twelve months. This may indicate that these services could play a role in the prevention of food insecurity.
- 6.7 Some respondents noted other vulnerabilities amongst members of their household, including mental ill health, disability or unemployment. As these factors increase the risk of experiencing poverty and food insecurity, it is likely that the Community Food Bus's reduced-cost model benefits these households through providing more affordable and nutritious food choices. It was also felt that the smaller, condensed model alongside the affordable prices contributed towards removing anxiety for customers when compared to shopping at larger supermarkets.
- 6.8 Some members reported that accessing the Bus had led to positive improvements on their intake of healthy foods, through increasing the accessibility and affordability of these products and enabling them to try new things. Others felt that the choice of food options was good and more affordable than other shops, but that this did not impact upon their intake of healthy food or wider wellbeing.
- 6.9 Most survey respondents reported accessing the food bus due to its affordability and wider benefits, rather than because they were food insecure, suggesting that the low-cost food helps to free up

disposable income which can be spent on non-essential items onboard the Bus or café. This has implications for the longer-term financial sustainability of the model, as this income could be used to cover staff and stocking costs, as well as to supplement the provision of further services to those on lower incomes. This also has potential implications for reducing reliance upon grant funding which can cause uncertainty.

- 6.10 Many of the ambitions of the project are yet to be fully realised, such as the introduction of wider support services aboard the Bus, or the provision of cooking demonstrations and training sessions. Despite this, it is clear that the small number of members who were consulted felt positively towards the project and viewed the Community Food Bus as a space to interact with family and wider community members, while saving money on food.