



FEEDING HOPE

The Impact of Affordable Food Clubs on Nutrition and Wellbeing

SURVEY REPORT SUMMER 2024



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Acknowledgements

We are deeply grateful to the coordinators and volunteers at participating Affordable Food Clubs who made this survey possible. The impacts detailed in this report are a testament to their hard work and dedication to their communities. We also extend our thanks to the research participants for sharing their experiences, and to Comic Relief and Sainsbury's for their generous funding that supported this work.

All photos of Affordable Food Clubs included in this report come from partner organisations across the Feeding Britain network. We are grateful to CHAT, Be Enriched, Kennishead Larder, ThreeHills Larder, The C3 Store, Number 7 Birkenhead, Hope Pantry, Bassetlaw Community Shop, Southampton City Mission and Sydenham Community Shop for allowing us to use their photos in this report.

About Feeding Britain

Feeding Britain is an award-winning charity with a vision of a UK where no one goes hungry. We support a national network of 120 regional and local anti-hunger partnerships, which include more than 390 Affordable Food Clubs from all across the UK. Further information about Feeding Britain can be found in the appendix.

Authors

This research is a collaboration between Anna Lopez, Rose Edom-Bray and Andrew Forsey at Feeding Britain, and Professors Greta Defeyter and Paul Stretesky at Northumbria University and the University of Lincoln. Further information about Professor Greta Defeyter and Professor Paul Stretesky can be found in the appendix.

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To discuss this report, please contact info@feedingbritain.org.

Forward

“Over the past 5 years, a new sector of dignified food aid has emerged – Affordable Food Clubs such as pantries, social supermarkets and larders. These projects provide access to low cost nutritious food for households who may otherwise be at risk of hunger. Across the Feeding Britain network, there are now around 400 of these projects, supporting a collective membership of 91,000 households.

In this report, we set out what thousands of people have told us about the impact of this work on their quality of life. The results are striking. Large majorities report that, since accessing an Affordable Food Club, they have eaten more fresh fruit and vegetables. They have cooked and eaten more balanced meals at home. Having also accessed a wider range of services, taken part in a larger number of activities, and saved money on essential items, they tell us that their wellbeing has improved.

Against a backdrop of considerable hardship and rising living costs, the importance of these results cannot be overstated. Here we have a programme which makes a sustained and significant difference to people's dietary intake while busting many of the cruel limits that poverty so often places on their lives. In that sense, Affordable Food Clubs play a similar role to Holiday Clubs offering nutritious meals and enriching activities for children and young people outside term time. Together, these two programmes are helping to transform for the better the characteristics, functions, and outcomes of community food provision.

There is also some evidence to suggest that Affordable Food Clubs can help people before they need food banks, or provide a stepping stone away from dependence on food banks. Crucially, the Affordable Food Club model preserves people's sense of dignity and freedom – to choose their own items from a wide selection of fresh, chilled, frozen, long-life and household goods, and to pay a manageable fee for them.

When I began researching food poverty, I realised that Affordable Food Clubs could provide a flexible and effective part of the solution. This report provides robust evidence in support of that realisation, and will, I hope, be of help and interest to policymakers and practitioners searching for ways of making good food more accessible for those who have least in our society.

Baroness Boycott, Chair of Feeding Britain

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Introduction

Food insecurity remains a persistent challenge in the UK, affecting 13.6% of households as of June 2024¹, with families and children particularly vulnerable. In response to this injustice, food banks have expanded rapidly in the past decade, distributing millions of crisis food parcels each year. More recently, however, Affordable Food Clubs have emerged as a means of seeking to provide a more sustainable, dignified response to food insecurity. Dignity is offered through choice and payment, with members benefiting from access to healthy food, financial savings and social connections. This report presents the findings of the first UK-wide survey of Affordable Food Club members, conducted in the summer of 2024 with nearly 2,500 respondents across 68 clubs. The study reports the impact of these clubs on members' nutrition, finances, wellbeing, and access to services, concluding that Affordable Food Clubs significantly improve members' perceived health and wellbeing while providing substantial financial savings at a household level.

While Affordable Food Clubs provide significant and important benefits to households and may even attenuate food insecurity at the household level, it is not likely that they can eliminate the problem of household food insecurity on their own. Nevertheless, these clubs are an important part of the policy response to food insecurity in the UK, especially when they are supplemented by other focused policy measures. Consequently, the report concludes with recommendations for more sustainable and dignified food provision, while emphasising the necessity of broader policy changes to effectively tackle the root causes of food insecurity in the UK.



Key Findings

Affordable Food Clubs are reaching communities most in need of support, where levels of deprivation and food insecurity are high. 77% of Affordable Food Club members surveyed experience food insecurity, compared to 14% of the population, and 69% of Affordable Food Clubs in the Feeding Britain network are located in areas ranking within the most deprived 30% in the United Kingdom.

Affordable Food Clubs enable members to stretch their budgets further, with the dignity of choice and of payment. Members saved an average of £18 per visit to an Affordable Food Club, with more than half of families with 3 or more children saving at least £20 per visit and one fifth saving over £30.

Members identified significant health benefits associated with their use of Affordable Food Clubs. More than 98% of members reported improved access to affordable fruit and vegetables, with 75% saying that they eat more fresh fruit and vegetables. Similarly, 98% reported being able to afford to eat more balanced meals, and 71% are now cooking more meals at home. 74% of members also reported wellbeing improvements since accessing Affordable Food Clubs, with members who experienced food insecurity most likely to report improved wellbeing.

Affordable Food Clubs play an important role in connecting members with wraparound support and social activities, with 64% of members reporting accessing other services or activities, such as advice to improve their financial situation, through the Affordable Food Club.

Affordable Food Clubs should form one layer of a multi-layered strategy to support people to transition from food insecurity to food security. Almost half of members reported that they had a reduced need for food banks since attending an Affordable Food Club. That said, for more than a third of members, their circumstances necessitated the use of both food banks and Affordable Food Clubs. While Affordable Food Clubs can provide people with access to a choice of healthy food at an affordable price, wider systemic change is also required to ensure nobody in the UK suffers from food insecurity.

Methodology

MEMBER SURVEY

In the summer of 2024, Feeding Britain conducted a comprehensive survey of 2,460 service users across their network of Affordable Food Clubs. The survey, available both online and in paper format, explored participants' shopping habits, the impact of Affordable Food Clubs on their health, diet, wellbeing, and access to services, as well as the price and perceived value of the goods offered. Demographic information was collected from respondents. Affordable Food Club coordinators and volunteers actively promoted participation, circulating surveys, speaking to shoppers and displaying posters. In recognition of their time, respondents were offered £5, which was given as a voucher off a future shop at their Affordable Food Club.

The 2,460 respondents were drawn from 68 Affordable Food Clubs across Britain, and were diverse in their age, ethnicity and family structures. The median age of respondents was 50, with 8% of respondents aged under 30 and 11% older than 70. 30% of respondents lived alone, while 44% had at least one child under 16 in their household. Just over a quarter of households with children were lone parent families, while three quarters include at least two adults over 16. Women comprised the majority of respondents, at 73%. 77% of participants identified as white, 5.8% as Asian/Asian British, and 6.4% as Black, Black British, Caribbean or African. Uniting these respondents was a shared experience of food insecurity - more than 77% were food insecure, compared to 14% of the UK population. Many also relied on emergency food aid, with 36% of respondents having used a food bank in the past 30 days.

COORDINATOR SURVEY

During the same period, Feeding Britain conducted a survey of coordinators from Affordable Food Clubs that participated in the members' survey. Coordinators or volunteers from 57 organisations provided insights on the model of food provision offered by the Affordable Food Club, membership criteria, food sourcing, and years of operation. By integrating these responses with member data, we were able to draw comparisons between member experiences and the specific characteristics of each Affordable Food Club.

Affordable Food Clubs

Affordable Food Clubs have emerged as an innovative response to food insecurity in the UK, providing direct food support in an environment that offers choice and preserves dignity. These clubs take various forms, ranging from pop-up pantries in church halls to established social supermarkets in town centres, and mobile grocers operating from converted buses. What unites them all is a shared purpose of tackling food insecurity, and three characteristics: people make a financial contribution, for food made available at a low cost, in the form of groceries (rather than pre-prepared meals)². By positioning members as shoppers rather than beneficiaries of charity, this model bridges the gap between food aid and conventional supermarkets³, and offers users the dignity of choice and of payment⁴.

The combination of choice and affordability offered by Affordable Food Clubs not only upholds dignity but also supports better health outcomes. Members gain access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables, cook more balanced meals at home, and report improved overall wellbeing. Moreover, Affordable Food Clubs create stigma free environments for those facing food insecurity, which allows the clubs to connect members with broader support services and social activities. This blend of dignified food provision and wraparound care provides a holistic approach to tackling food insecurity.

The growth of affordable food provision in the UK has been swift, with the first social supermarket in the UK believed to have opened in 2013⁴. By 2023, it was estimated that 5% of the UK population had used a social supermarket in the past year⁵. Our survey findings reflect this growth, showing that most members attended Affordable Food Clubs that had been operating for an average of three years. Of those surveyed, 14% were members of clubs operating for less than two years, while 24% attended Affordable Food Clubs that had been in operation for five years or more.



Affordable Food Clubs primarily aim to support low-income households and address food insecurity. To ensure that support is targeted, the majority operate in the areas of highest need, with 69% of Affordable Food Clubs in Feeding Britain's network located in the UK's most deprived areas. Many clubs also apply membership criteria, such as living within a specific area or receiving means-tested benefits, and some Affordable Food Clubs partner with food banks or support organisations to ensure that people accessing crisis services receive ongoing support. Our research shows that this targeted support is proving effective - 77% of Affordable Food Club members experience food insecurity, compared to 14% of the UK population. The rate is higher still for clubs with membership criteria, suggesting that these targeted efforts help reach those most in need.

Beyond food provision, many Affordable Food Clubs help members access additional services that address the root causes of food insecurity. These services include welfare rights and debt advice, health checks, and social activities. Many Affordable Food Clubs also run cooking and nutrition workshops, and encourage members to share recipes made with ingredients sourced from the club. More established Affordable Food Clubs—those operating for five years or more—were more likely to offer these wraparound services, with members of longer-standing clubs being significantly more likely to have accessed additional support compared to members of newer Affordable Food Clubs.

What stands out from these findings is the consistency of positive outcomes across a range of models of affordable food provision. More than three quarters of Affordable Food Club members experience food insecurity, indicating that regardless of how support is targeted, it is effectively reaching the communities most in need. Furthermore, 74% of members report improved wellbeing since joining an Affordable Food Club, and 64% have accessed broader support or activities through the service, suggesting that affordable food provision is able to provide tangible health and wellbeing benefits, while connecting members to wraparound support.



Health, Nutrition and Wellbeing

Food insecurity, experienced by over three-quarters of Affordable Food Clubs members, is linked to poor health outcomes and increased risk of diet-related chronic diseases⁶. This connection underscores the critical importance of access to nutritious, affordable food for maintaining good health, particularly in low income and food insecure communities.

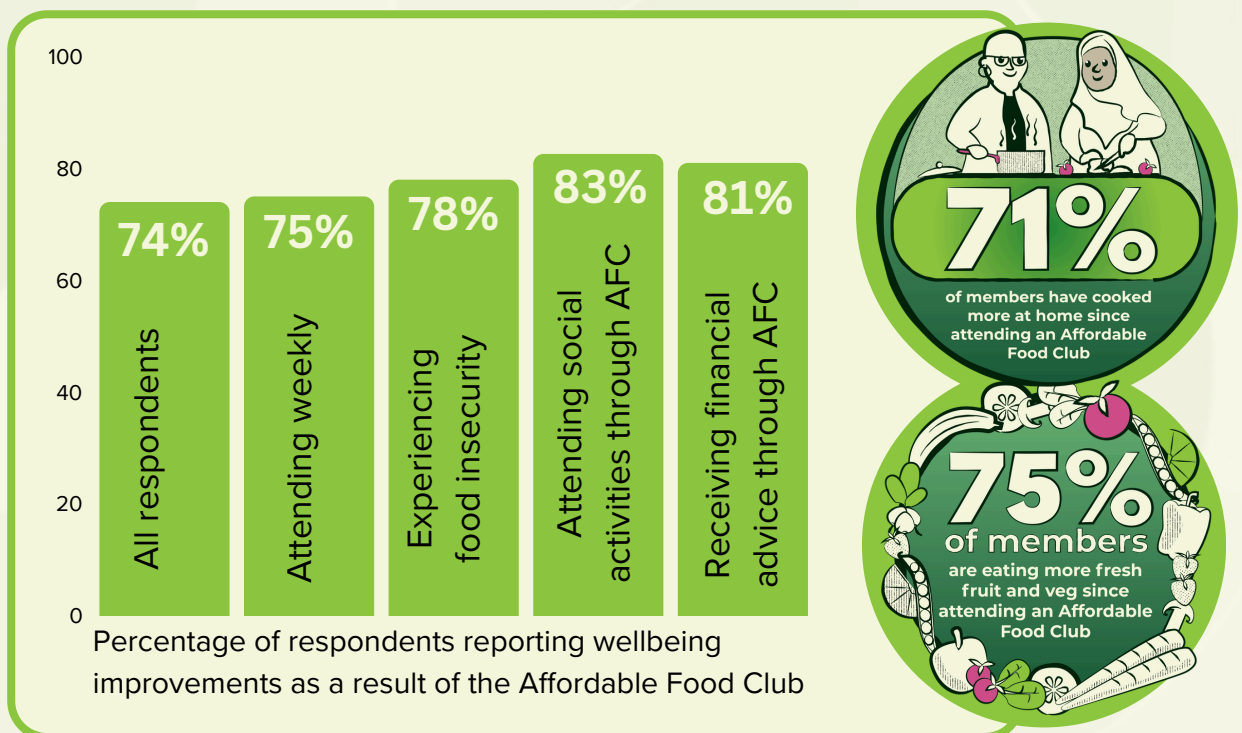
Previous research suggests that social supermarkets contribute to their users' ability to prepare healthier meals, and links this to a lessening of financial strain that enabled users to buy healthy food that they would otherwise struggle to afford, as well as an increased likelihood of trying new foods⁷.



This survey finds that Affordable Food Clubs have an overwhelmingly positive impact on the health and nutrition of their members; 98% of whom report being able to afford to eat more balanced meals as a result of attending an Affordable Food Club. A similar 98% of members reported that their access to affordable fruit and vegetables had been improved by the food club. The impact of Affordable Food Clubs on dietary habits has been substantial, with 71% of members reporting an increase in home cooking since joining, and 75% stating that they now consume more fresh fruits and vegetables. These positive changes are even more pronounced in households with children, where 73% report cooking more at home and 77% are eating more fresh produce.



These health and nutrition improvements appear to be closely linked to the low cost of groceries at Affordable Food Clubs, mirroring Mulrooney et al's⁷ finding that social supermarket users are concerned by health but often feel unable to afford healthier choices. Affordable Food Club shoppers who reported higher savings per visit were more likely to report improved nutrition, with 83% of members who felt they saved more than £20 per visit reporting eating more fresh fruit and vegetables since attending the Affordable Food Club, compared to 56% of shoppers who felt they saved under £10 per visit. Alongside the provision of affordable groceries, many Affordable Food Clubs support the health of members by offering cooking and nutrition activities, and advice with health and social care. 28% of members surveyed had engaged in cooking and nutrition activities, with more than four fifths of these respondents reporting that they now cook more at home, compared to 67% of those that have not participated in such activities through their Affordable Food Club.



Alongside supporting physical health, Affordable Food Clubs appear to enhance members' general wellbeing, with 74% reporting improvements since their household began using the service. These wellbeing improvements were most pronounced among members who had received financial advice, or attended social activities, through their Affordable Food Club. Regular attendance at an Affordable Food Club was also associated with greater reported improvements to wellbeing.



The impact of Affordable Food Clubs on health, nutrition, and wellbeing is most pronounced for members experiencing food insecurity. These individuals were significantly more likely to report positive changes in cooking at home, eating balanced meals, accessing affordable fruits and vegetables, and overall wellbeing since joining an Affordable Food Club. Moreover, there was a strong correlation between the extent of food insecurity and the reported impact on dietary balance, with the most food insecure members (those who reported that they ‘always’ worried they would run out of food because of a lack of money) reporting the greatest impact of the Affordable Food Club on their ability to eat balanced meals and access affordable fruit and vegetables.

74%
of members...

...have experienced improved wellbeing since using this service

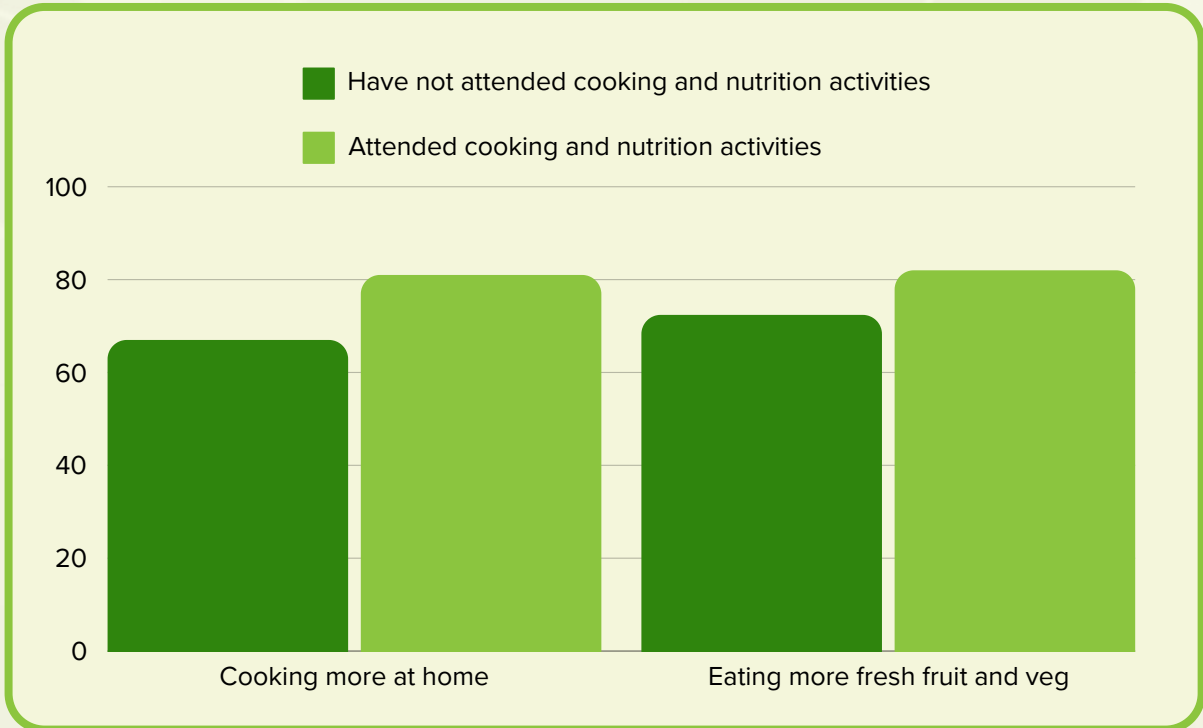
“Friendship brings me here. If you’ve only got a couple of pounds, it will make a few meals... People will help you here. And that’s what it’s all about.”

Access to Services

In addition to directly supporting their communities with affordable food, many Affordable Food Clubs connect members to other services, including financial advice, social activities, credit union services, and cooking classes. Some will do this by referring members onwards to other services, while many will co-locate advice workers on site and host social activities. 64% of members report having participated in at least one activity or service through their Affordable Food Club. Among members who had engaged with at least one activity or service, the average number of different services or activities participated in is 2.3.

Members most commonly reported having participated in social, cooking or nutrition activities through their Affordable Food Club. Participation in these activities appears closely linked with positive health measures - members were more likely to report increased wellbeing since attending the Affordable Food Club if they had also attended social, cooking or nutrition activities. Participation in cooking and nutrition activities was also positively correlated to other reported health outcomes, with more than 80% of members who had participated in these activities reporting cooking more at home and consuming more fresh fruit and vegetables, compared to 67% and 72% of members respectively who hadn't participated.





Almost one third of members had participated in advice that supported financial wellbeing (including advice on benefits, pensions, energy or other utilities, housing and rent and debt and credit) through their Affordable Food Club. Members who received this advice were 60% more likely to strongly agree that their wellbeing had been improved by attending their Affordable Food Club compared to those who hadn't received any financial advice. This underscores the importance of Feeding Britain's Pathways From Poverty programme, which seeks to co-locate wider support within Affordable Food Clubs as a means of maximising people's incomes and bringing vital services to previously underserved communities

Across the network, these services are being effectively targeted to individuals in the greatest need, with those members facing greater food insecurity more frequently participating in the activities and services offered. This difference in participation by food insecurity is particularly pronounced for financial advice and credit union services, while cooking, nutrition and social activities, and advice on social care, are those activities where the gap in participation is smallest.



Financial Benefits

In offering food at reduced prices, Affordable Food Clubs enable members to stretch their budgets further and save money on weekly expenses. Members report saving an average of £18.06 per visit to an Affordable Food Club, and taking home almost 7 'meals' worth of food. Over the course of a year, these savings add to an average of almost £830 per member, although this figure is significantly influenced by how often a member shops.

Estimated savings varied significantly by member and across different Affordable Food Clubs, with larger households more likely to report higher savings per visit. Households with children report saving more money when shopping at an Affordable Food Club – 20% of families with 3 or more children reported saving an average of £30 or more per visit, compared to 9% of households without children. More than half of households with three or more children reported that they saved at least £20 with every visit to an Affordable Food Club.

Some Affordable Food Clubs support members to make the most of these savings by partnering with local credit unions, encouraging members to put aside a small amount of the money and enabling access to affordable credit. 5% of members surveyed had accessed credit union services through their Affordable Food Club.

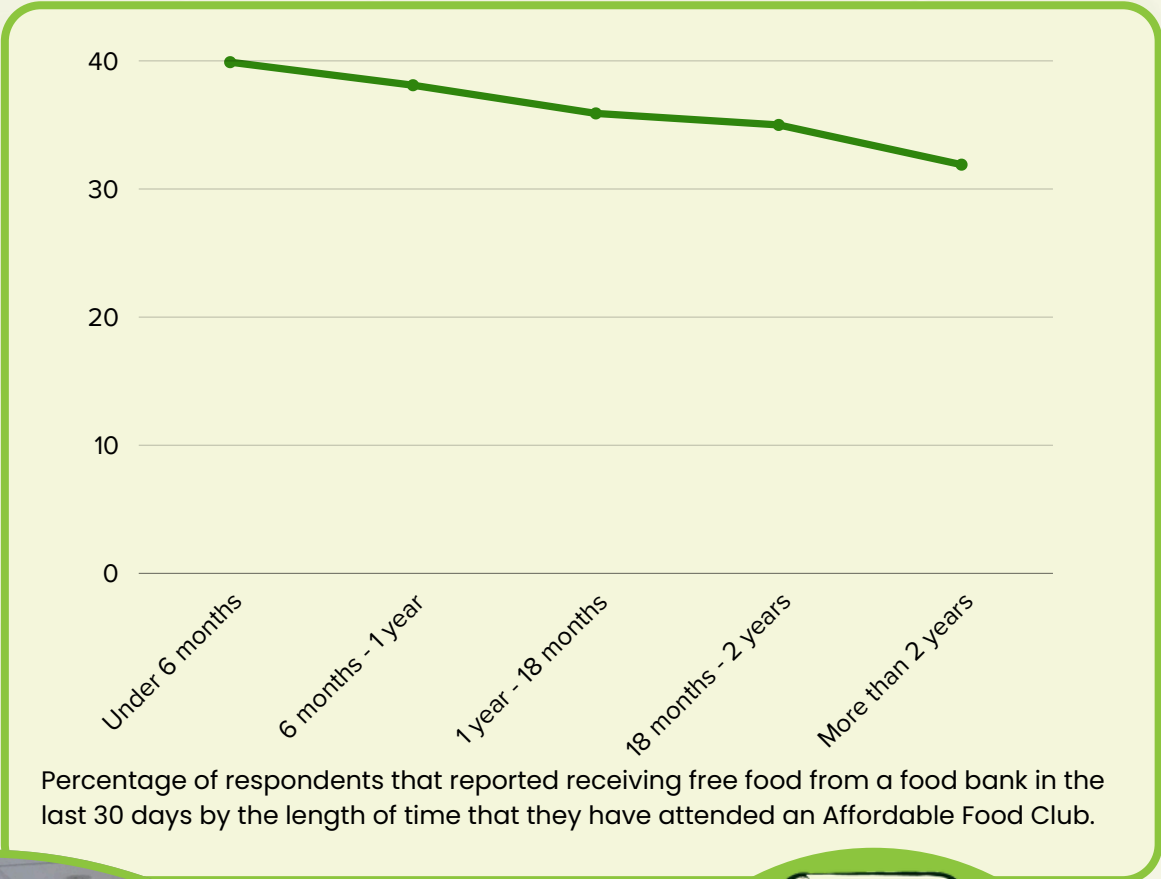
These savings not only impact household budgets but also contribute to overall wellbeing. Wellbeing improvements are closely correlated to perceived savings at Affordable Food Clubs – 88% of members who felt that they saved more than £30 per shop experienced wellbeing improvements compared to 52% of those who felt they saved under £5.

“I have to budget as I get money monthly, so the pantry works really well to help stretch that, and nothing gets wasted as I get to choose what I want.”



Long Term Impact on Food Security

Affordable Food Clubs appear to reduce reliance on emergency food services, with 47% of members reporting decreased food bank usage since joining an Affordable Food Club. This reduction in food bank usage was most pronounced among members who shopped weekly. There was also a trend suggesting that members who had been attending an Affordable Food Club for a longer period were somewhat less likely to report receiving free food from a food bank in the last month. The proportion dropped from 40% among those who had joined an Affordable Food Club within the last six months to 32% for those who had been attending for at least two years.



£826.12
Average total savings per household per year

Despite these positive trends, it's important to note that food insecurity remains prevalent among Affordable Food Club members, with over three-quarters reporting that they worried about running out of food due to financial constraints. Furthermore, 37% of Affordable Food Club members received free food from a food bank at least once in the previous month, suggesting that many members still find themselves relying on food banks to some degree.

This indicates that, while Affordable Food Clubs play a crucial role in helping members access affordable and nutritious food, they do not universally transition members from crisis situations to food and financial security. Instead, Affordable Food Clubs appear to function as part of a broader support network, complementing rather than replacing other food assistance programmes for some members.

“I don't feel ashamed like I did when I used the food bank and I'm not as stressed as normal, which is good for my mental health.”



Summary

In a landscape where nutritious food is too often out of reach for many, Affordable Food Clubs are bridging the gap, providing dignified access to healthy food. This report demonstrates the impact of Affordable Food Clubs on members' diets, increasing access to fresh fruit and vegetables. This is not simply a question of provision; this report suggests that, when people are given reliable access to this food through Affordable Food Clubs, their dietary habits improve. The vast majority of respondents who shop at Affordable Food Clubs say that they consume more fresh produce, eat more balanced meals, and cook more at home. These health benefits are particularly pronounced for those who shop more frequently. Beyond nutrition, Affordable Food Clubs have a positive impact on wellbeing, and in many cases serve as community hubs, facilitating access to social activities and well needed services. These wraparound services further enhance member outcomes, with participation in additional services through the Affordable Food Club linked to a range of positive outcomes, including wellbeing, consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables and home cooking.

Alongside the positive health and wellbeing impacts of Affordable Food Clubs, the survey underscores their success in connecting with and supporting those struggling with food insecurity. Affordable Food Club members are much more likely to experience food insecurity compared to the general UK population, suggesting that their support is well targeted, a statement that remains true even when considering only Affordable Food Clubs that do not operate referral or income-based membership criteria. Importantly, the benefits provided by Affordable Food Clubs are most pronounced among those with the greatest need. Members facing higher levels of food insecurity report more significant improvements in their ability to eat balanced meals, access affordable produce, and experience enhanced overall wellbeing. This trend is particularly evident in the uptake of additional services, with food insecure members more likely to engage in financial advice and other support activities offered through Affordable Food Clubs.



This research highlights that the financial relief Affordable Food Clubs provide acts as a cornerstone of their impact, underpinning improvements in nutrition, wellbeing and overall quality of life. On average, members save just over £18.00 per visit, amounting to annual savings of £826.12 per household. These savings are crucial, as the survey shows a strong correlation between the amount saved and the reported improvements in nutrition and wellbeing. Members who save more per visit are more likely to report eating more fresh produce and experiencing wellbeing improvements. This underscores the importance of Affordable Food Clubs maintaining their affordability to continue benefiting vulnerable communities effectively. Crucial too is the effective targeting of Affordable Food Clubs to serve the most vulnerable communities, as it is with the most food insecure individuals that food clubs have the greatest impact.

While Affordable Food Clubs demonstrate promise in reducing reliance on emergency food services, with almost half of members reporting decreased food bank usage, they are not a comprehensive solution to food insecurity. Despite the financial savings they offer, a significant portion of Affordable Food Club members still worry about running out of food due to financial constraints, and some continue to rely on food banks. This reality underscores that Affordable Food Clubs, while offering an innovative way to enhance food access and nutrition, are best viewed as a vital component within a more comprehensive support network rather than a standalone solution to food insecurity. The findings from this research emphasise the pressing need for a two-pronged approach: first, to further develop and expand sustainable, dignified food provision models, and second, to advocate for systemic policy changes that address the underlying causes of food insecurity in the UK.



Recommendations for Policymakers

The UK Government has made a welcome commitment to end the mass dependence on crisis food parcels, which it describes as a moral scar on our society. We believe that three sets of reforms are required to fulfil that commitment.

1 A Social Safety Net

First, reforms need to be introduced in both the social security system and the labour market to ensure that fewer people are left short of money to buy food and other essentials. In particular, we believe a fresh approach is required to benefit deductions, sanctions, and assessments – three parts of the system which often trigger periods of hunger and food insecurity.

2 A Nutritional Safety Net

Second, we recommend a strengthening of the nutritional safety net for children and young people. The automatic registration of all eligible children and young people for their Healthy Start and free school meal entitlement, alongside a revision of the eligibility criteria for these programmes, as well as School Holiday Programmes, would ensure every child and young person living in poverty receives support toward their dietary intake.

3 A Local Safety Net

Third, as this report demonstrates, placed-based approaches which co-locate dignified food support with a wider range of services and activities can make a meaningful contribution to the quality of life for people at risk of food insecurity; giving them a greater sense of control over their lives, improving their health, nutrition and wellbeing, and busting the limits that poverty has so often placed upon them. We recommend that policy and funding decisions are taken to encourage the wider adoption of this approach in underserved parts of the country.

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Appendix

FEEDING BRITAIN

Feeding Britain is an award-winning charity with a vision of a UK where no one goes hungry. We support a national network of 120 regional and local anti-hunger partnerships, which include more than 390 Affordable Food Clubs from all across the UK. Since 2021, the number of Affordable Food Clubs within Feeding Britain's network has grown by more than 500%, with more regions looking to create affordable food provision. The Affordable Food Clubs within Feeding Britain's network serve more than 91,000 households and distribute the equivalent of 27 million meals per year.

The Affordable Food Clubs in Feeding Britain's network are based in deprived communities across the United Kingdom, enabling people on low incomes to stretch their budgets further. Feeding Britain supports these Affordable Food Clubs by providing funding, sharing best practice and resources, and building connections and communities of support.



If you are interested in finding out more about Feeding Britain or joining the network, please get in touch at info@feedingbritain.org



Biographies

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Professor Greta Defeyter is the Director of the Healthy Living Lab at Northumbria University and Chairs the Academic Advisory Group at Feeding Britain. Her research focuses on food insecurity, social and educational injustice, school breakfast clubs, and the Holiday Activities and Food programme. She has published extensively on these topics, with over 100 papers to her name. Greta was made a Fellow of the British Psychological Society in 2015 for her work with 'underserved and vulnerable' populations. She received a Food Heroes Award from Sustain for her research on school breakfast clubs and holiday hunger, and in 2020 was named one of the Big Issue's top 100 global change makers for her research and policy impact on food poverty. In 2022, Greta led the co-design of the HAF Plus programme with young people, tailoring holiday activities and food provision to their needs. This program is being implemented across several UK regions. She is also a co-lead of the Health and Wellbeing theme for Insights North East, bridging research and policy. Greta's recent appointments include becoming a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, President Elect for the Royal Society's Food and Health Council, and election to the ESRC Peer Review College, all in 2024. A sample of her work and publications can be found at: <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/takeontomorrow/it-is-time/holiday-activity-and-food-programmes>

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Professor Paul Stretesky is the Director of Teaching and Learning in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Lincoln and previously served as Associate Director of Healthy Living at Northumbria University. His research explores food insecurity, environmental injustice, and social inequality. Funded by research organizations in the U.S. and U.K., he has authored or co-authored 10 books, including *Applying Benford's Law for Assessing the Validity of Social Science Data* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).





Professor Stretesky has published over 100 peer-reviewed papers and nearly 50 book chapters and reports. His research ranks among the top 20 most influential bodies of work in the area of Law and Policy in the UK and the top 150 globally, according to Research.com. He has received awards from organizations such as the American Sociological Association, and his work has been cited in legislative debates in both the U.S. and U.K. It has also been featured in major media outlets, including the Chicago Tribune, Scientific American, USA Today, Washington Post, and ABC's World News Tonight.



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