

More Than Food: Older People and Community Food Spaces

Summary:

Feeding Liverpool is the city of Liverpool's food alliance, connecting and equipping people and organisations to work towards good food for all.

Throughout 2022 and 2023, Feeding Liverpool visited community food spaces across the city to gather stories and case studies from their older members and staff about their experiences of such spaces being a place of support beyond just food provision.

In Liverpool, one in three adults are food insecure – worrying about how they will afford food, reducing both the quality and quantity of food they are eating and, in some cases, even skipping meals and going hungry. For Liverpool's older residents, this is a sobering reality. Around 1.7 million pensioners in the UK are living in poverty, with rates of deep poverty also steadily increasing and currently standing at 8% for this group.

While financial difficulties are typically considered the main driver of food insecurity in younger age groups and amongst families, food insecurity in older people is much more complex. Older people are disproportionately affected by malnutrition, with an estimation of as many as 1 in 10 people over 65 at risk. Medical, physical and social risk not only contribute to malnutrition but often intersect, creating a vicious cycle.

As these factors tend to have a cumulative effect and increase in presence as people age, Feeding Liverpool began this project to help identify how community food spaces can make a difference in these circumstances. This report illustrates the multi-faceted nature of community food spaces and highlights their ability to help older adults in a variety of ways beyond just food provision. This is especially important when the complexities of food insecurity among the elderly are considered; there are numerous transitions that occur later in a person's life that demand forms of adjustment and adaptation in order to cope with the challenges these present. In order to mitigate these issues, older people can often find themselves dependent on multiple support systems – of which community food spaces can be one.

Among its key information, this report finds that:

- Community food spaces are welcoming and inclusive places that address loneliness by ensuring that people who attend them have a network of support they can rely on
- Food support spaces are typically managed and led by their members, which serves as a true testament to their work and the help they provide
- Community food spaces are pivotal, local pillars in the community, having the ability to improve the general wellbeing of older people by assisting them to participate in social setting again following the pandemic and the impacts this had on the older generation
- Food support spaces have the ability to improve the state of an individual's mental health by providing wraparound support that addresses the root cause of their food insecurity
- The nutritious, regular food that community food spaces provide allows older people to make healthier choices when it comes to food and helps them to improve their physical health

Introduction:

Food insecurity is defined as lacking 'regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth, development and an active and healthy life. This may be due to unavailability of food and / or lack of resources to obtain food'.¹ In Liverpool, one in three adults are food insecure; worrying about how they will afford food, reducing both the quality and quantity of food they are eating and, in some cases, even skipping meals and going hungry. The cold weather - combined with the rising costs of food and energy - has made this winter particularly challenging.

For Liverpool's older residents, this is a sobering reality. Around 1.7 million pensioners in the UK are living in poverty², with rates of deep poverty also steadily increasing and currently standing at 8% for this group. Although this rate is lower than for younger adult groups due to the fact that 97% of pensioner households receive the State Pension, it can't be ignored that pensioners who are reliant on Government support are vulnerable to falling into poverty.³ Based on financial considerations alone, however, pensioners living in poverty are the least likely age group to be food insecure: in the winter of 2020/2021, only 4% of pensioners in poverty indicated that they were experiencing food poverty.⁴ Instead, while financial difficulties are typically considered the main driver of food insecurity in younger age groups and amongst families, food insecurity in older people is much more complex.

Older people are disproportionately affected by malnutrition, with an estimation of as many as 1 in 10 people over 65 at risk.⁵ Malnutrition can play a role in causing a variety of co-morbidities and loss of independence in older people, contributing to a loss of energy, muscle strength and coordination which in turn can lead to falls, difficulty with shopping, cooking, eating and self-care.⁶ Medical, physical and social risks not only contribute to malnutrition⁷ but often intersect, creating a vicious cycle:

- Medical conditions and certain medications can lead to a loss of appetite, nausea, weight loss and difficulties in both making and eating food
- Social factors such as bereavement, social isolation, loneliness and attitudes towards nutrition and weight can affect an individual's interest in food and their motivation to eat

These factors tend to have a cumulative effect and tend to increase in presence as people age.⁸ Although the older generation adapt in order to mitigate these issues, all it takes is an accumulation of seemingly trivial everyday problems such as lack of seating or reduced public transportation to make people increasingly vulnerable to food insecurity.

It is in these circumstances that community food spaces can make a huge difference. Community food spaces are commonly led by local community members and organisations who have good food at the heart of their work, with many initiatives also connecting people who use their service to activities and support beyond food provision. They also play a large part in tackling local food waste by using surplus food that would otherwise have gone to landfill.⁹ A case in point is Love Wavertree - they provide a Food Club and community shop to residents of L15 - who have been credited for being more than just a place where individuals can access affordable, nutritious food. Indeed, the organisation has been praised for building a strong community that provides both support and connection to those who are in need. With operations such as this existing all across the city, it is possible to assess them in order to gain an insight into the role they play in providing support to older people beyond just their food provision.

¹ <https://www.fao.org/hunger/en/>

² <https://www.jrf.org.uk/work/uk-poverty-2023-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk#experiences-of-poverty>

³ <https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Older%20people%20food%20insecurity%20-%20August%202023.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/work/uk-poverty-2023-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk#experiences-of-poverty>

⁵ <https://www.bapen.org.uk/malnutrition/introduction-to-malnutrition/?showall=&start=4>

⁶ <https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Older%20people%20food%20insecurity%20-%20August%202023.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.malnutritiontaskforce.org.uk/sites/default/files/201909/State%20of%20the%20Nation.pdf>

⁸ <https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Older%20people%20food%20insecurity%20-%20August%202023.pdf>

⁹ <https://liverpool.gov.uk/benefits/help-in-a-crisis/foodbanks/#:~:text=Community%20Food%20Spaces,-Community%20Food%20Spaces&text=have%20good%20food%20at%20the,otherwise%20have%20gone%20to%20landfill>

Loneliness/Bereavement:

There has been a huge rise in the numbers of older people living alone in Merseyside, which is putting them at greater risk of social isolation, depression, and ill health. A census taken in 2011 highlighted that there were 81,524 people aged 65 and over living alone in Merseyside, which rose by 7.2% to 87,405 people by the end of 2022. This means that there are an additional 5,881 more pensioners living on their own than there was just a decade ago.¹⁰

In regard to older people, there is a direct correlation between social isolation and food, with the incremental life changes and losses that pensioners are more likely to experience having differing levels of practical and emotional impacts. For example, the tendency for older people to lose a partner or become increasingly excluded from groups they once used to belong to can affect their motivation to eat, their ability to afford nutritious food and their inclination to cook for one. The Director of Public Health for Sefton has expressed concern for this, overtly aware of the overall impact loneliness can have on the health and wellbeing of older individuals. Indeed, Health Foundation research has shown that people over the age of 65 who live alone are 50% more likely to go to A&E than those who live with someone else and a further study has indicated that nearly half of those aged 65 and over who are living alone have three or more long-term health conditions.¹¹

Community food spaces, therefore, play a key role in addressing this aspect of loneliness and ensuring that older people have a network of support they can rely on to get them through any tough times. Take Brian, for example – a 75 year old man who recently lost his wife. His daughter introduced him to the Love Wavertree Community Shop and Food Club; after visiting there many times herself, she knew that her father could benefit not only from the food they provide, but also from the sense of community that they foster. Thanks to the efforts of the organisation's volunteers, Brian now has a routine and makes regular visits to the Food Club, where he is able to access 10 items – good quality food such as tinned items, pasta, fresh fruit and vegetables, and cereals – as part of his membership. He has also realised that he is part of a wider community and has found a sense of comfort through connecting with others, particularly when walking his dog with other members of the club in the local park. Brian was also provided with a hand-delivered Christmas hamper; not only did this provide him with food to last over the festive period, but it let him know that people in the community were looking out for him.

The idea that 'local food clubs provide not only an important financial boost to families but also help to break isolation and build connections across the community' has held true for Shaun too. His weekly visits to the Love Wavertree Community Shop and Food Hub have enabled him to find 'a sense of comfort and routine' that has been indispensable to him following the recent passing of his partner. Indeed, the fact that community food spaces are usually open at the same time each week and are run by the same staff members or volunteers has offered Shaun familiarity during a difficult time. It is through becoming a member at the organisation that Shaun too has come to realise that 'he is part of a wider community' and that people are looking out for him.

Creating a welcoming and inclusive space where people are treated as individuals rather than generic clients is an important aim for community food spaces.¹² An elderly woman who has been living in the UK for 22 years credits Acronym Community Empowerment for their success in providing such an environment, commenting on how much she appreciates the help and support they have offered her. Indeed, she has often felt that nobody takes care of her in the UK as they would have done in her home country – something that changed when she started visiting the organisation. As such, she is grateful for the care she has received that reminds her of her own culture.

Liverpool Six Community Association, which is run by both staff and volunteers, have also seen the benefit of their organisation first-hand. Alice, who now lives alone after her husband passed away, has found it difficult to attend events due to becoming 'very withdrawn, anxious and depressed' following her loss. However, since visiting Liverpool Six Community Association, Alice has managed to attend a Christmas Lunch Club; although she was 'nervous and quiet at first, she had a smile on her face by the end of the afternoon and left laden with a food hamper and a Christmas Day meal'.

At Love Wavertree, it is obvious that they value building and sustaining a strong, supportive local community just as much as providing affordable, nutritious food to those in need. This is especially important when taking into consideration the above concerns regarding the direct correlation between social isolation and food, particularly

¹⁰ <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/rising-numbers-lonely-old-people-25605565>

¹¹ <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/rising-numbers-lonely-old-people-25605565>

¹² <https://www.feedingliverpool.org/being-a-member/>

when it comes to the impact this can have on an individual's health. Wendy is a prime example of how community food spaces can assist in cases such as this. As a long-term volunteer, her unwavering dedication to the organisation has seen her be credited as the driving force behind the centre's success. Unfortunately, Wendy became seriously ill in August 2022 and spent several weeks in the hospital, leaving the other staff members at Love Wavertree worried and uncertain about her future. Upon her return home in mid-December, the staff at the Community Shop and Food Hub started to send Wendy a weekly shopping bag full of food; this was intended not only as a token of appreciation for all that she had done for the organisation, but as a way of supporting her through a time when she was physically unable to maintain her health by herself. This, no doubt, would also have had a positive impact on her mental health too, knowing that she had been alleviated of food concerns and that she had a support network around her.

Sandra – a woman in her 80s who is housebound – has a similar story. As a result of her carers struggling to find the time to do her food shopping for her, Sandra started to form a close bond with Fazakerley Community Federation; they began to deliver food packages to her once a week and even supported her by arranging for a locksmith to attend her home when her keypad broke. The advancement of their relationship – FCF now speak on the phone with Sandra daily in order to check in with her and make sure that she is doing well - is a testament to the trust Sandra now has in the organisation.

The importance of having a community food space in the community in order to address mental health concerns that have resulted from loneliness is demonstrated through 80 year old Jenny's story. As a recent widow and member of the Christ Church Toxteth Park Pantry, Jenny describes the food hub as being a 'lifeline' for her due to its ability to enable her to 'eat healthily and reduce [her] anxiety'. Indeed, through visiting the pantry, she has 'valued the company of others' and gained 'firm friendships' that have 'grown through a shared shopping experience'. Other local food clubs, such as The Drive, also credit their organisations for supporting people not only with the food they provide, but also by being a friendly environment that encourages people to chat and 'not feel so alone'. This is validated by a member of The Drive's Food Club, who speaks highly of the positive impact making friends at the pantry has had on her mental health.



Volunteering:

Volunteers at food support spaces have been described by North Liverpool Foodbank as 'the life blood' and 'driving force' behind such organisations.¹³ The thousands of volunteers that help each week to get emergency food to people in a crisis contribute more than 4 million unpaid hours of work each year, the value of which has been calculated to equate to £21,818,967.¹⁴

Samantha Stapley, Head of Operations for The Trussell Trust, has spoken on the value of volunteers to the company: '...the amazing and tireless work done by foodbank volunteers up and down the UK... [is] a testament to the power and generosity of communities. And without this vital community support, hundreds of thousands of people would be hungry and with nowhere to turn.'¹⁵

Community food spaces, however, are not just welcoming spaces to those who use them, particularly as they aim to be both managed and led by their members. Indeed, a Micah Food Volunteer has described his role as a 'hugely rewarding experience' that he hopes to be involved in for many years to come¹⁶ and a regular pantry member at the Joseph Lappin Centre says that 'it [lifts] her spirits to be doing something worthwhile [that] she [can] call her own'.

The idea that volunteers not only give back to the community but also benefit themselves from the support of a food space is demonstrated through Joan's story. Joan was initially brought by Nicola – her neighbour and friend– on her visits to the Love Wavertree Food Club as part of Nicola's aim of trying to help her get out of the house more frequently. Here, she learnt that she could not only access food items, but could also purchase items of clothing and have a cup of tea with others in the local community. Perhaps most importantly, however, Joan became more aware of what is happening in her local area through the support and resources available at the organisation, which enabled her to meet with others and connect over a plate of food. Joan is now a regular fixture at Love Wavertree and is in the process of becoming a formal volunteer herself – a true testament to the work and help they provide.

Erin, who is a member at the Liverpool Irish Centre, also started helping out 'with tea and refreshments when she [could]' after being so delighted with the support she received from the organisation. The centre itself has recognised how much people from the local area 'look forward to coming to visit [them]' and getting 'any help and assistance [they] can offer', highlighting how much the cost-of-living crisis has affected older people in the community and 'those living alone with no family'.

South Liverpool Voluntary Inclusion Programme have also witnessed this to be the case when an elderly individual came to them for help. A bereaved woman first started visiting the organisation after losing her life-long partner and learning of her financial situation now she was alone: there, she was provided with wraparound services, was supported when setting up appointments with benefit advice organisations and was assisted when planning the funeral. The woman credited the organisation for '[saving] her life', not only for providing her with food support but for enabling her to build relationships with other people in the community. She is now a volunteer there herself, which she says has helped to ease her depression, given her confidence, allowed her to make new friends and use her life skills to help others in the same situation she had previously found herself in.

¹³ <https://northliverpool.foodbank.org.uk/give-help/volunteer/>

¹⁴ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2017/10/17/foodbank-volunteers-30-million-unpaid-work/#:~:text=to%20support%20foodbanks-,Volunteers%20across%20the%20UK%20giving%20at%20least%20%2%A330%20million,unpaid%20work%20to%20support%20foodbanks&text=Share%20this%3A,to%20UK%20foodbanks%20every%20year.>

¹⁵ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2017/10/17/foodbank-volunteers-30-million-unpaid-work/#:~:text=to%20support%20foodbanks-,Volunteers%20across%20the%20UK%20giving%20at%20least%20%2%A330%20million,unpaid%20work%20to%20support%20foodbanks&text=Share%20this%3A,to%20UK%20foodbanks%20every%20year.>

¹⁶ <https://micahliverpool.com/blog-post/a-year-in-the-life-of-a-foodbank-volunteer-what-i-have-learned/>

Supporting People After COVID:

While some older people developed strategies to cope with the COVID pandemic, a significant proportion experienced a heavy toll on both their physical and mental health as they stayed at home in an attempt to stay safe.¹⁷

AGE UK heard a huge range of experiences when collating information for their report on the subject:

- The Covid-19 pandemic made it harder for older people to look after their physical health: not only were their opportunities to be physically active reduced, but a significant number also experienced delays in accessing healthcare and treatment. As a result, older people claimed they had lost independence and had a reduced ability to do the things they used to enjoy.
- Many older people mentioned that the pandemic left them feeling anxious, depressed and fearful for the future. Most notably, older people who felt they had managed during the first wave of the pandemic reported that they started to struggle more as the pandemic had gone on, particularly in regard to employment and their financial situation.¹⁸
- Restrictions on going out and meeting others left vast numbers of older people feeling lonely, isolated and forgotten. Many older people said they went days without seeing or speaking to anyone, making them feel like prisoners in their own homes; unsurprisingly, this had a knock-on effect on their mood and made them feel down, tearful and doubtful that anybody cared about them.¹⁹

These findings imply that the pandemic had a greater impact on the general wellbeing of older people than younger people²⁰, particularly if they were also coping with bereavement, from a lower social grade or ethnic minority, or were an unpaid carer.²¹

Community food spaces have found that many older people are still recovering from the impacts of COVID; as many people secluded themselves from their local communities due to the lockdowns, their day-to-day livelihoods took a negative hit. A case in point is Ms Abbassi who, following the pandemic, was 'unable to overcome her fears to go out shopping, continue her friendships or participate in community life' – an issue that was exacerbated by the impact the cost-of-living crisis had had on her 'mental health and wellbeing'. Pakistan Association Liverpool, however, have been a pivotal local pillar in the community for Ms Abbassi. Indeed, through accessing their support, she has felt comfortable enough to 'attend one of [the organisation's] social evenings', which was the first time she had 'entered a social setting after almost three years' of remaining indoors.



¹⁷ https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/id204712_hi_covid-report-final.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/articles/impactofcoronavirusonpeopleaged50to70yearsandtheiremploymentafterthepandemic/2022-03-14>

¹⁹ https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/id204712_hi_covid-report-final.pdf

²⁰ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/articles/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsonolderpeopleingreatbritain/3aprilto10may2020#well-being>

²¹ https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/id204712_hi_covid-report-final.pdf

Mental Health and Wraparound Support:

The mental health impact of food insecurity is striking. Participants in a survey from The Money and Mental Health Policy Institute described the effect of the cost-of-living crisis on their mental health, stating that they experienced 'feelings of anxiety, depression and hopelessness' as a result of their financial situation.²² This is corroborated by a study conducted in 2021 that compared levels of psychological disorders between people with high food security and those with low food security; it found that compared to low-income adults with high food security who screened at 14.3% for depression, 20.5% for anxiety, and 17.8% for high perceived stress, low-income adults with very low food security screened at 54.9% for depression, 58.9% for anxiety, and 66.3% for high perceived stress.²³

Stress in regard to food insecurity is often a result of the uncertainty that surrounds an individual's basic need for nourishment. Indeed, anxiety about not knowing where one will get their next meal and questions about the quality of food being consumed can cause huge emotional strain on a household's wellbeing.²⁴ The Trussell Trust notes that these mental health issues can also drive financial difficulty by making it harder to earn, service debt, manage spending and ask for help.²⁵

The COVID-19 Pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis has also highlighted the importance of food security as a health predictor, evidenced by the correlation between reduced food insecurity and an increase in chronic diseases.²⁶ These health challenges can be observed across Liverpool: at the age of 50, almost half of the population in Liverpool have at least one morbidity and, by the age of 65, 41% have multiple morbidities. The city also has high levels of both adult and childhood obesity, whose distribution across the region correlates strongly with levels of deprivation.²⁷ Struggling to get by, therefore, causes prolonged exposure to illnesses that are known to affect the brain and trigger mental conditions such as stress, mood disorders, depression, anxiety and sleep disturbances.²⁸

Community food spaces now understand the importance of supplying wraparound support alongside their food provision as a means of providing people with pathways out of both acute and chronic food insecurity. Indeed, 98% of food support organisations in Liverpool now offer at least one form of 'wraparound support' for people who use their services and over 40% of food support spaces co-locate money and debt advice, and/or welfare and benefits advice services.²⁹ This type of support is extensive, however, and can include cooking and growing activities, communal eating, volunteering opportunities, holiday programmes and social activities.³⁰

Feeding Britain have seen the benefits of wraparound support provision at community food spaces through their Pathways From Poverty model, which involves placing specialist advice workers into community-led food projects in order to help resolve some of the wider issues that UK households are facing when they receive help regarding food. They have found that the advisors are able to build trusted relationships with households, which enables them to impart their knowledge about benefits, debt, budgeting, housing, energy, and employment in a familiar setting to the recipient – work that has helped to maximise people's incomes, cut short the period of time that they are struggling to access or afford food, and break the limits that poverty can place on their lives.³¹

At Teardrops Supporting Your Community, they manage their funding to ensure that people who use their organisation are not only provided with hot meals, but also have access to support and advice. They first met Stuart when he began attending their service after finding himself placed on long-term sick leave and struggling to provide for his family after taking on the care of his grandchildren; the extra bills and his inability to now use the

²² <https://www.nhsconfed.org/long-reads/why-preventing-food-insecurity-will-support-nhs-and-save-lives>

²³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10893396/#:~:text=In%20the%20study%20by%20Wolfson,66.3%25%20for%20high%20perceived%20stress>

²⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10893396/#:~:text=In%20the%20study%20by%20Wolfson,66.3%25%20for%20high%20perceived%20stress>

²⁵ <https://hub.foodbank.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-The-Trussell-Trust-Hunger-in-the-UK-report-web.pdf%20p15>

²⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10893396/#:~:text=In%20the%20study%20by%20Wolfson,66.3%25%20for%20high%20perceived%20stress>

²⁷ <https://www.feedingliverpool.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Without-Access-to-Justice-Report-2024-2.pdf>

²⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10893396/#:~:text=In%20the%20study%20by%20Wolfson,66.3%25%20for%20high%20perceived%20stress>

²⁹ <https://www.feedingliverpool.org/city-leaders-gather-to-celebrate-progress-made-in-2nd-year-of-liverpools-good-food-plan/#:~:text=98%25%20of%20food%20support%20organisations,services%20at%20their%20food%20spaces>

³⁰ <https://communitiestogetherdurham.org.uk/from-food-bank-to-food-club/>

³¹ https://feedingbritain.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Pathways-from-Poverty_-The-co-location-of-support-services-April-2022.docx.pdf

organisation's night service was having a severe effect on his mental health. The help Teardrops Supporting Your Community provided was twofold; they not only provided the family with meals that they could collect on a daily basis – including during weekends and throughout the school holidays – but they also took Stuart on as client so that they could advise him on benefits and budgeting. The fact that this allowed him to fully devote his time to looking after the children whilst not having to worry about when their next meal would be is a testament to the incredible additional support community food spaces supply.

As in Stuart's case, many other people have also found that they could begin to address the root cause of their food insecurity through their access of food provision at community food spaces. Tommy – a pensioner in his late 60s who lives alone – began to receive food vouchers from Autism Adventures Training CIC after he shared with the staff there that he was struggling to pay for fuel and find money for food. They have since identified that he is eligible for Attendance Allowance and have helped him to fill in the necessary forms to access this help. Alongside the slow cooker he has been provided, the Christmas hamper he has received and the warm space he has been welcomed into, Tommy has credited the extra support he has received from the organisation for making a huge difference to his mental health.

The ability of community food spaces to improve the state of an individual's mental health by providing wraparound support that addresses the root cause of their food insecurity is prevalent in a case study from Norris Green Community Alliance. An older lady who lived alone first started attending the organisation in order to access their Listening Ear Service, where she disclosed that she was struggling financially and having to regularly skip meals to ensure she had enough money to pay her bills. After hearing this, the organisation was not only able to provide her with weekly food bags and welcome her to their lunch clubs, but they were also happy to signpost her to welfare benefits advice that would help to better support her financially. Since receiving this help, the lady has felt that her stress and worry surrounding her financial concerns have reduced and she credits her new friends for improving the state of her mental health.



Improving Health Through The Quality And Quantity Of Food:

Community food spaces pride themselves on offering an abundance of wide ranging high-quality food:

- Foodbanks aim to provide food parcels that contain a minimum of three days' worth of 'nutritionally balanced, non-perishable, tinned and dried foods. A typical food parcel may include breakfast cereal, soup, pasta, rice, pasta sauce, tinned meat, tinned vegetables and UHT milk'. Some foodbanks also provide fresh produce if it is available.³²
- Food pantries, which are set up to look and feel like a shop, have commercial fridges and freezers they can store food in.³³ As such, they are able to provide fresh fruit and vegetables, frozen and chilled food, meat and dairy products alongside the general long-life tinned and packaged food.³⁴
- Organisations such as FoodCycle provide community meals – an invitation to sit with others around a table and enjoy a hot, nutritious meal. They work with supermarkets, small grocery shops and markets to source edible surplus food responsibly, often reclaiming fresh fruit and vegetables and purchasing dried food and spices in order to make their meals as balanced and healthy as possible.³⁵

The impact of healthy food provision at community food spaces has been highlighted in the 2023 Your Local Pantry Social Impact Report. It found that out of 100 members:

- 60 would say that they were enjoying improved physical health
- 59 believed they were eating less processed food
- 63 now eat more fresh fruit and vegetables³⁶

Phil, a retired regular guest at FoodCycle's community meals, can attest to this. As the meals provided are both regular and healthy, he finds them to be something he can look forward to every week. Further, as organisations tend to only issue meals that are vegetarian, Phil has been introduced to ingredients he had never even heard of before but that he enjoys due to them tasting 'really good' and being 'really healthy'.³⁷ John – a 72 year old member of the Florrie Food Union – has a similar sentiment, stating that knowing he will have a hot meal provided to him on the same day every week brings him joy.

For some elderly individuals, this food can be the only hot meal they get throughout the week. This was the case for 84 year old Margaret, who attends the 64 Trust every day. She has revealed to the organisation that she would be lost without the food provision and that she can't bear to think of how different the state of her life would be without this 'little hidden gem'. Indeed, she has described her situation as a 'big black curtain opening for her'.

As mentioned at the start of this report, elderly people struggle to shop, cook and eat enough nourishing food due to issues that are more prevalent to them, such as limited mobility, failing health and, in the case of Sharon, being a carer. Sharon initially approached Kensington Fields Community Association to say that she was disabled and struggling to go out and purchase food due to having to take care of her terminally ill husband. KFCA stepped in immediately and now ring her every Tuesday to take a food order, even going the extra mile to deliver the parcel – often containing extras such as cheese, eggs, milk and butter - to Sharon's door. She has credited the organisation for enabling her and husband to have access to more fresh food than they normally would, allowing them to eat meals that contain fruit and vegetables alongside the meat she typically prepares.

The ability of food parcels to allow people to make healthier choices when it comes to meals has also been appreciated by 71 year old Bette. Bette lives alone and was significantly affected by the decline in the value of her pension and its purchasing power, particularly when it started to restrict the money she had available to buy food and pay her utility costs. She also had mobility issues, which made shopping difficult and painful. Since receiving food hampers from Riverside Learning and Education Centre, however, Bette has been able to cook what she calls

³² <https://southliverpool.foodbank.org.uk/get-help/faq/#:~:text=A%20typical%20food%20parcel%20includes,if%20they%20are%20able%20to.>

³³ <https://www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/>

³⁴ <https://www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/what-is-a-pantry/>

³⁵ <https://foodcycle.org.uk/community-meals/>

³⁶ <https://www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/what-is-a-pantry/social-impact-reports/>

³⁷ <https://foodcycle.org.uk/stories/phil-guest/>

Feeding Liverpool

'combination meals' – a meal that contains meat, rice or pasta, and fresh vegetables. She feels that the hamper has been particularly useful in enabling her to make her own choices when it comes to meals, whilst ensuring that she maintains a healthy diet through the provision of a large variety of food options.

The positive impact the nutritious food provided by community food spaces can have on an individual's health is demonstrated through 67 year old Mr Ansari's story. He came to Our House Walton Community Hub hungry and unclean; he was in poor health and living alone in poor conditions due to his struggles in making his pension last and coping with expensive bills. The organisation was able to give him hot meals, bags of emergency food and a festive hamper, alongside support that helped him to pay his bills. Mr Ansari said his health was previously being impacted by the lack of nutritious food he was able to consume and that the food he was now beginning to receive had easily saved his life. Indeed, it had helped him to feel physically stronger and, therefore, able to get help with his health conditions.



Conclusion:

This report illustrates the multi-faceted nature of community food spaces and highlights their ability to help older adults in a variety of ways beyond just food provision. This is especially important when the complexities of food insecurity among the elderly are considered; there are numerous transitions that occur later in a person's life that demand forms of adjustment and adaption in order to cope with the challenges these present. In order to mitigate these issues, older people can often find themselves dependent on multiple support systems – of which community food spaces can be one.³⁸

Community food spaces are welcoming organisations, run by members of the local community for those in the area. While they work to address people's immediate food needs, they also serve to build a more sustainable and healthy community for the long-term. Indeed, these spaces have the potential to tackle social isolation, allow people to learn new skills, enhance mental and physical wellbeing, and knit neighbourhoods together – particularly through intergenerational relationships.



³⁸ <https://beta.bathnes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Older%20people%20food%20insecurity%20-%20August%202023.pdf>