FOOD CITIZENSHIP

Building community food resilience

Food Ethics Council

Contents

Communities can change the world for the better – and good food is a brilliant way to bring communities together to drive positive change

We have written this guide to unpick and understand what a path to building community resilience in the UK could look like, focusing on the role of community food organisations. We want to facilitate a shift away from current emergency food aid models reliant on food charity towards approaches that build long-term community food resilience. It is the result of a 2-year programme hosted by the Food Ethics Council to co-develop long-term strategies to address household food insecurity in the UK, using the **food citizenship framework** as a guide.[1]

During 2020 and 2021, we at the Food Ethics Council hosted workshops and discussions with organisations working in the context of emergency food aid in Sheffield. We also conducted interviews with experts in poverty, social justice and charitable food aid. Building on our own knowledge and experience in complexity-led design, systems change, and food citizenship, we explored the challenges faced by organisations tackling hunger, hardship and injustice, and the innovative approaches which have helped them.

Who is this guide for?

1. **Do you work with your local community to make lives better?**

2. **Is food part of what you do?**

If you answer **yes** to both of these questions, then this guide is for you.

This is a guide intended for people working (paid or voluntary) on the ground of addressing hunger, hardship and injustice in the UK and anyone that wants to change things for the better.

What is this guide for and how might it help you?

Use this guide if you want to be part of moving beyond an increasing reliance on charitable food aid towards building resilient communities (with good food at their heart) and/ or if you feel stuck, disempowered and don't know where to start.

Our guide offers:

- Practical tools, resources, questions to ask, things to experiment with – drawn from workshops and interviews the Food Ethics Council has done with people and organisations just like yours

- Inspiration – examples of organisations and initiatives that are doing amazing things, that you can learn from and try out in your work

Important context for this guide

We believe in the power of people and communities – and of building resilience from the ground up. We have seen how communities came together, organised and responded to the food crisis when COVID-19 first hit the UK. But crucially the responsibility must not be on individuals and communities doing everything on their own, particularly when it comes to providing emergency food aid. This would be unjust and unsustainable.

At the Food Ethics Council, we strongly believe in addressing the root causes of hardship, hunger and injustice – and in moving away from a 'sticking plaster' emergency food aid model. In recent years, the UK has seen the growth and increasing institutionalisation of food banks and other forms of charitable food aid. That must not be allowed to continue.

Increasing the reliance on food charity can be – and has been – used as an excuse for inaction by government (and others). It is national government that has the ultimate responsibility for ensuring people are fed – not just fed enough, but fed well. That means it's not just about calories, but about sufficient healthy and culturally appropriate food for all.

Food insecurity in the UK affects over five million adults[2] and many children too, with significant regional inequalities in different parts of the UK. While we all have a role to play, institutions – like national government, local authorities, businesses, regulators and investors – have a duty and responsibility to act. We want them to provide the necessary support that allows bottom-up community food resilience to flourish.

This guide explores what community organisations can do themselves to encourage bottom-up community food resilience. It is not a step by step, or a prescriptive list of how to operate and it is not a substitute for structural changes needed. Instead, we intend it to be a hopeful prompt that inspires action, building on the community spirit shown during the pandemic.

Creating a fair society free of hardship, hunger and injustice consists of several elements, including:

- Improving access to healthy food for all;

- Stopping people being pulled into poverty by improving access to quality jobs and affordable homes;

- Reforming social security; and

- Building community resilience

Building community (food) resilience is vitally important, but is only one part of the jigsaw.

How can community food organisations:

1. **Change the language** – reframing the current emergency food aid/redistribution model towards building community resilience

2. **Rethink** how to refer to those they work with to remove stigma, and build more engaged and empowered community members

3. **Integrate** better in the local community

4. **Focus** on what to build (rather than fight against)

Change the words and change the system

We live in a world where millions still go hungry and where there are lots of empty calories. A world where industrialised food production and distribution creates environmental damage and vast amounts of waste. A world where there is a rising tide of hunger and poverty. Communities are increasingly relied upon to fill gaps left by government and others. How can we find our way out of this situation?

Powerful narratives about poverty and cheap food underpin current policy and practical solutions in this space. To change the situation from both the top down and the bottom up, we first need to reframe the narrative and tell different 'stories' about the problem and the solution.

We can begin with stories. Stories of people, food and connection.

The stories we hear and tell over and over again shape how we think about ourselves, our communities and how we live. To truly address household food insecurity, we have to come at it differently – to address causes not just symptoms. Working alongside community food organisations, businesses, think tanks and NGOs, it seems there are currently two contrasting stories in play at once: the 'consumer story' and the 'citizen story.'

The dominant story
Consumers receiving food

When we are treated as consumers, we are passive recipients of a food system (or a food parcel or voucher). Our power within the food system is limited to what we buy – what food products and from where. Anyone who is unable to buy food, lacking funds or access, often has no choice but to rely on food charity, which is usually given with limited, if any, choice in what they receive. As well as denying that person agency in what they and their family eat, this also creates an 'us and them' dynamic between those providing charity and those needing it, leaving little room for dignity and empowerment. This is linked to an increasing fear of being in need.[3]

In the 'consumer story', food is primarily functional: a biological need, with emergency food as a plaster for an emergency need – hunger. It is also a commodity, which becomes 'waste' if it is not purchased. This waste has been used as a reason for more redistribution to emergency food organisations, which are under increasing pressures to feed communities. This encourages a focus on the efficiency of food distribution: how well can we siphon off food that goes unsold to give it for free to those 'in need'? In that way, waste and hunger go hand-in-hand, bolstering a food system which systematically produces both.

When we frame people as consumers and food as a commodity, we focus exclusively on the economic aspect of hunger. This inevitably leads to our society at best asking questions like 'How can we make food affordable for everyone?' Two potential solutions are widely promoted – firstly the cheapening of food and secondly food charity. The first ignores the consequences of cheap food on food and farm workers (often themselves among the first to experience poverty), farmed animals and the environment. The second ignores the impact that relying on charity has on one's sense of self. Conversely, it shuts down questions of whether access to funds should so fundamentally affect our ability and our right to access good food. These are the traps of the consumer story. The consumer story though, is incomplete. There is no place where the consumer story fails more than when people can't afford good food, i.e. nutritious, sustainable and culturally appropriate food. Of course, having enough money in our pocket is vital, but hunger is more than an economic issue alone.

As a society, the way we deal with hunger (through the proliferation of food banks and other forms of emergency food aid provision) is an emergency response, rather than a long-term solution to address its root causes. This is where we are trapped because people need food today and we must respond. But how can we get people out of the emergency room and ultimately prevent them from having to be there in the first place? What could an alternative model look like, and how do we get there?
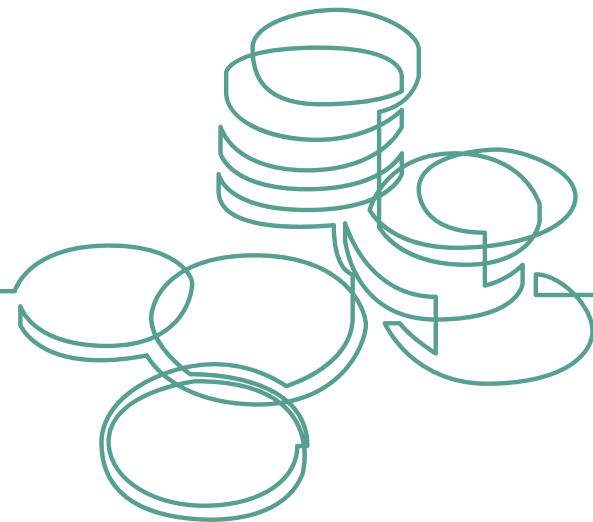
An emerging story

Citizens gathering around food

The citizen story makes us more than just consumers. As food citizens, our role in society, and in shaping our food environments, expands beyond our purchasing power, and opens up the door to a multitude of ways in which to participate. As food citizens, we generate more ideas and innovation, and care for people, animals and the planet.

Studies show that when we are addressed as citizens, rather than consumers, both our motivation to participate in our local community and our concern for others (and the environment) increase[4]. The way we talk about ourselves and each other has an impact on our beliefs, our values, and our actions.

**Change the words and change the system.**

There are as many solutions as there are different communities.
This is one example of many of how people in a community can come together...

It's a chilly autumnal afternoon and Nancy is flitting around the room, catching up with familiar faces, welcoming new ones and filling up cups of tea. Alfred has just arrived, smiles at the hustle and bustle, takes off his winter coat and settles down at the far end of the table.

Nancy drops off a cup of tea and introduces him to Sonia sat next to him. She's cradling a small child, whilst another one of her young ones runs about, playing with some of the other kids. Alfred smiles at the baby and tells Sonia how nice it is to meet her and be surrounded by people, he says it's been a fair while since he spoke to anyone because he lives alone and he misses chatting. She agrees and says since arriving in the town only a few months ago, she's found it tricky to meet people.

A little further along sits Joshua, who tells some of the young children about the local farm he was at this morning. He arrived earlier in the day with big boxes of veg grown locally. He's explaining that the veg is delicious, with funny bumps and scratches, and that it's now in the kitchen with Bilal who will turn it into something divine.

Bilal learned to cook from his mother, dishes that he otherwise struggles to find in town, but which remind him of his childhood. He loves cooking big bubbling pots and is convinced it tastes best when you share it with others. Spending a Saturday every now and then at the community hall, cooking up a storm and sharing his skills makes him feel warm and contented. People come and go, but the community buzz is faithfully there, every Saturday.
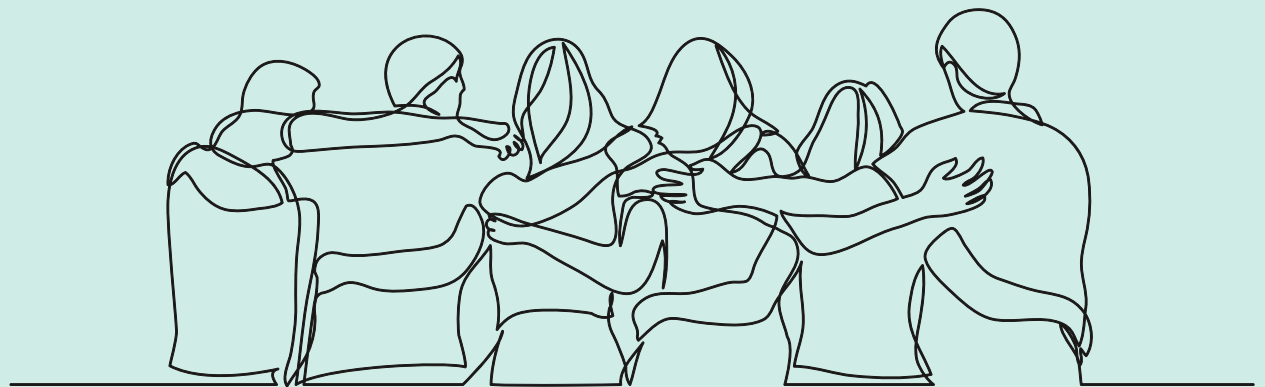
As citizens, we are naturally disposed to care, and we need a deep sense of purpose in our lives to be happy. We also need to have meaningful power in order to sustain that care and purpose, meaning that inaction is often more reflective of a lack of power than lack of intention. In a world where money is power, we need to work extra hard to identify, protect, and expand opportunities where people can participate beyond their wallet.

Everyone has something to contribute to the community and can shape their food environment. We all have skills, knowledge, ideas and assets that can benefit the community. Food citizenship is about exchange, and reciprocity enables people to feel valued.

In our story, Nancy may be hosting the food space, while Sonia helps Alfred feel less lonely. Alfred has been in the area so long, he tells stories to the children that give them a sense of connection with their local environment. Bilal feels accepted by his community and creates a space where all foods can be celebrated. Joshua brings energy and passion about the environment to his neighbours. Each play a role in building community, each connected through food. The story of Nancy, Alfred, Joshua and Bilal is just one example of many different potential stories of people using the power of food to build community resilience.

We need the support of a community to thrive. One of the most ancient ways to bring people together is through food. Food in this story is not just an end in itself (i.e. nutrition). Community food organisations already know this[5] – the food they provide is a starting point to bring people together, to nourish our bodies as well as our sense of belonging, our friendships, our communities. These connections are where innovation and solutions uniquely adapted to a local context can emerge. Food becomes the social glue that creates community, makes connections, encourages exchange of stories and ideas, creating a hotpot of hope and action.

The social impact of food needs to be valued – particularly by those who currently hold financial power – measured, and widely shared. What the citizen story tells us is that poverty and hunger are fundamentally about disempowerment and disconnection.

By being clearer and more conscious about working from the citizen story, we can better step into a hopeful future – and free ourselves from the consumer traps that have undermined our society. By highlighting the differences between these stories, we can create space for organisations tackling hunger and building food security and resilience to (re)focus their strategies and increase their long-term impact.

Food Works
Sheffield

"We want to show that a different world is possible."

Rene Mejer
CEO at Food Works

Established in 2015, Food Works Sheffield is a social enterprise which is working to build a fair and sustainable food system for everyone in the city. With a Kitchen serving surplus food saved from landfill, a Market distributing healthy, affordable food and a Farm, empowering people to grow their own food, Food Works operates on multiple fronts. Working with hundreds of volunteers, Food Works feeds thousands of people every month, and feeds them well.

We love that beyond offering food, Food Works equips people with the tools to make change, by developing the skills and knowledge to make responsible choices around food, but also the confidence to campaign for change from businesses and government. Food Works partners with local organisations to deliver workshops and courses for the local community.

The Market and Kitchen projects have reimagined uses of surplus food, centring dignity and choice by focusing on making their food good, healthy and accessible to all: 'By sharing the food we have, we build more resilient communities where everyone can be nourished. Each of our hubs has a market where you can pick up a box of daily surplus food in exchange for a donation'. (**https://thefoodworks.org/market/**)

The Farm project converts unused plots of land across the city into community growing spaces. Here they work with volunteers to grow more food locally, building community food resilience and connecting people meaningfully to the food they eat. This year, Food Works invited local growers to participate with the **Grow a Row** scheme, dedicating a row of crops to Food Works. This hugely increased the amount of locally grown, healthy food being produced and eaten, but also introduced more of the community in Sheffield to its work in an inspiring and empowering way.

Shifting towards a citizen story addressing root causes of hunger and hardship

Seeing the differences in these stories allows us to challenge the consumer story where it no longer serves us. It also enables us to strengthen the food citizen story so we can build long-term solutions to hunger and hardship.

So how do we go from a consumer to a citizen story addressing root causes of hunger and hardship?

What solutions become visible when we do?

Shifting from consumers to food citizens

1

As organisations embedded within communities, community food organisations can find ways or enhance the times when people are treated as citizens rather than consumers.

As consumers, our value is measured through our financial contributions. As citizens, our value is acknowledged in much more diverse ways. While a supermarket relies on exchanging money for groceries, a community food organisation can create other forms of exchange among and between its local residents.

This could take the form of peer-to-peer emotional support or the sharing of stories, bringing important skills (e.g. taxi drivers helping with transport and delivery, warehouse managers giving tips on how to manage food supplies, local residents cooking and sharing recipes and signposting new guests to local services or artists teaching new skills). Money has its place but so too do the spaces, tools, knowledge, experiences and contacts we can share. These are some of the valuable assets we each bring to our communities.

WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING

Community food organisations treating people as citizens rather than consumers are able to engage the energy, passion and skills of their community members. For example, **Food Works** brings communities together in Sheffield under common values, rather than common experience, wanting to take care of the planet and each other. There is little distinction between staff, volunteers or community members, and there is no gatekeeping at the door: everyone is welcome.

Granville Community Kitchen in London is another example, with the organisation itself being "run by the community, for the community", knowing that people have so much to bring to the table when treated with dignity and respect, nurturing a culture of participation and mutual exchange. For example, people who can't afford the veg box can access the box in exchange for helping out by packing the remaining boxes for a morning. That way the box is not a handout and the community member also has something to offer the community (their time and work).

Another organisation that embodies this belief and shows the kind of activities that can take place in food spaces is **Camerados** a community-led 'public living room' where "the answer to our problems is each other." Their ethos is based on the practice that "if someone is struggling, try asking them to help you." Their pop-up living rooms invite anyone who needs a chat to join others who need it too. Rather than separating those giving and those receiving a service, here people support one another and exchange their time and empathy.
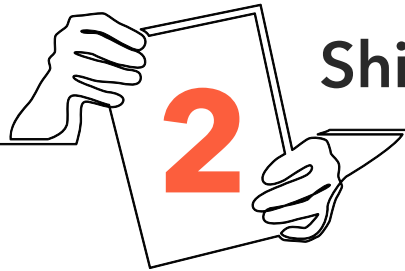
2 Shifting from food spaces to social spaces

Food can be a catalyst for social change, with community food organisations playing a pivotal role. Good food can be used as a way to invest in local communities, rather than only feeding them.

Whilst many organisations are very much dealing with emergency needs exacerbated by COVID-19, community food organisations can still shift the stories they tell. While a focus on 'how many meals we've provided' has its place, other data tells a bigger story. For instance, how many people have we connected with? How do people feel when they come together?

Emergency food spaces have often been designed to get food in and out as quickly as possible, particularly during the pandemic.

Beyond the pandemic, can we re-think community spaces to see how effective they are at nurturing social interactions in the space? Can we bring people together through a shared sense of place and local community, rather than (only) through their shared experience of poverty? Flexibility is important, as people may want to feel heard and understood by those who have had similar experiences, while simultaneously wanting to avoid being defined by one particular label.

By changing the story of spaces from nutritional to social, community food organisations can redefine and expand what they can achieve. To go beyond providing food, to strengthening connections and building a future together.

WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING

Food Ladders, developed by Dr Megan Blake, focuses on shared social practice, and puts the emphasis on more than the nutrient, calorie and commercial aspects of food, to include food's capacity to bring people together, fostering shared understanding and collaboration. Food spaces become safe and inclusive places that allow interaction and experimentation with food, which can build a community's sense of identity, and belief in people's ability to create change.

When **Participatory City** launched its **Every One, Every Day** project in Barking and Dagenham, it started by opening "maker spaces" that local residents could shape to their own needs. One of the first uses for the space was to section off a corner of the room and turn it into an informal nursery. In doing so, the local residents helped tackle one of the first barriers to creating new projects and businesses: accessible childcare[6]. Providing communal spaces that are designed by residents allows flexible designs to emerge that uniquely cater for local needs.
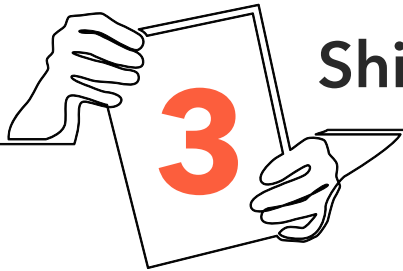
3 Shifting from 'poverty' to 'empowerment and connection'

When we expand the issue of poverty, it allows us to not just tackle the symptoms (hunger and hardship) but also the structural changes required for long-term change.

Instead of thinking about poverty only as a lack of funds, we can reframe it as a lack of agency and connections. This expands the debate beyond economics alone, and sheds light on the multiple factors which determine whether or not someone is able to participate fully in their communities.

Engaged and empowered people are essential to building and nurturing resilience i.e. the ability for individuals and communities to sustain shocks, looking after themselves and each other and ensuring needs are met.

WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING

The Garden of Earthly Delights is a community garden in Hackney, London. They recently had to move home, after development began on their old site. Moving into this new space, they wanted to make sure local residents were as involved as possible, to ensure the garden would serve the needs and desires of the local community. A series of workshops were hosted, ending in a community assembly, inviting local residents into the space and asking them what activities and features the garden should have. How should it feel when you walk in? The invitation was that local residents claim the space as their own and are deeply involved in the building and maintenance of the garden.

CoFarm Foundation, through its trading subsidiaries CoFarm Cambridge and CoFarm Estate Limited, brings people together to grow and share nutritious food, and helps build stronger communities and healthier ecosystems. In 2019, CoFarm kick-started its first open community consultation process to gather community views, thoughts, feelings and ideas for co-creating Cambridge City's first community farm. Around 190 local residents participated with a wealth of ideas, suggestions, aspirations and hopes for the space, which led to a community farm design brief that the community reviewed during phase two of the co-designing process. This shows that communities are thriving with energy that is just waiting to be unleashed.

A model to empower local residents comes from **Detroit Soup**, a "microgranting dinner celebrating creative projects" in Detroit, USA. The community gathers around a communal meal on a regular basis and it costs just a few dollars to participate. During the meal, four members of the community get four minutes each to share their project idea for the community. The audience is allowed to ask them four questions, followed by which everyone can discuss and debate before voting. Once everyone has voted on what project they think will most benefit their community, the presenter wins the money that was collected at the door. In one evening, communities are brought together, ideas are accepted by the community, and the resources to kick-start it are made available, connecting and empowering local communities.

4 Shifting from 'meeting a need' to 'building capacity'

When it emerges that everyone has skills and assets to contribute, food is a social tool, and poverty is an issue of disempowerment and disconnection, then we open up a whole new set of potential solutions.

While focusing on need allows us to ensure no one is left behind, focusing on what is being built, i.e. connection and power to create change, we can connect a broad range of organisations under the same mission. We can shift from thinking only about how we can feed people, and expand it to how we can reconnect and empower communities with the resources they already have. Not only does this allow community food organisations to reframe the identity of communities and citizens from having only needs to having assets, but it can also generate brilliant conversations and ideas on how to move forward. It is the kind of environment that helps innovation and the creation of micro-enterprises, which in turn shape our foodscapes.

WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING

Blend Kitchen is a social enterprise in Sheffield set up with the aim of changing the lives of people with significant challenges to overcome. It is an example of how small businesses and social enterprises can create change within communities and the local food environment. It provides training and work experience for those not often given opportunities, offering them dignity and pride, through meaningful employment in the hospitality sector. Blend Kitchen has worked with both commercial and community partners for support.
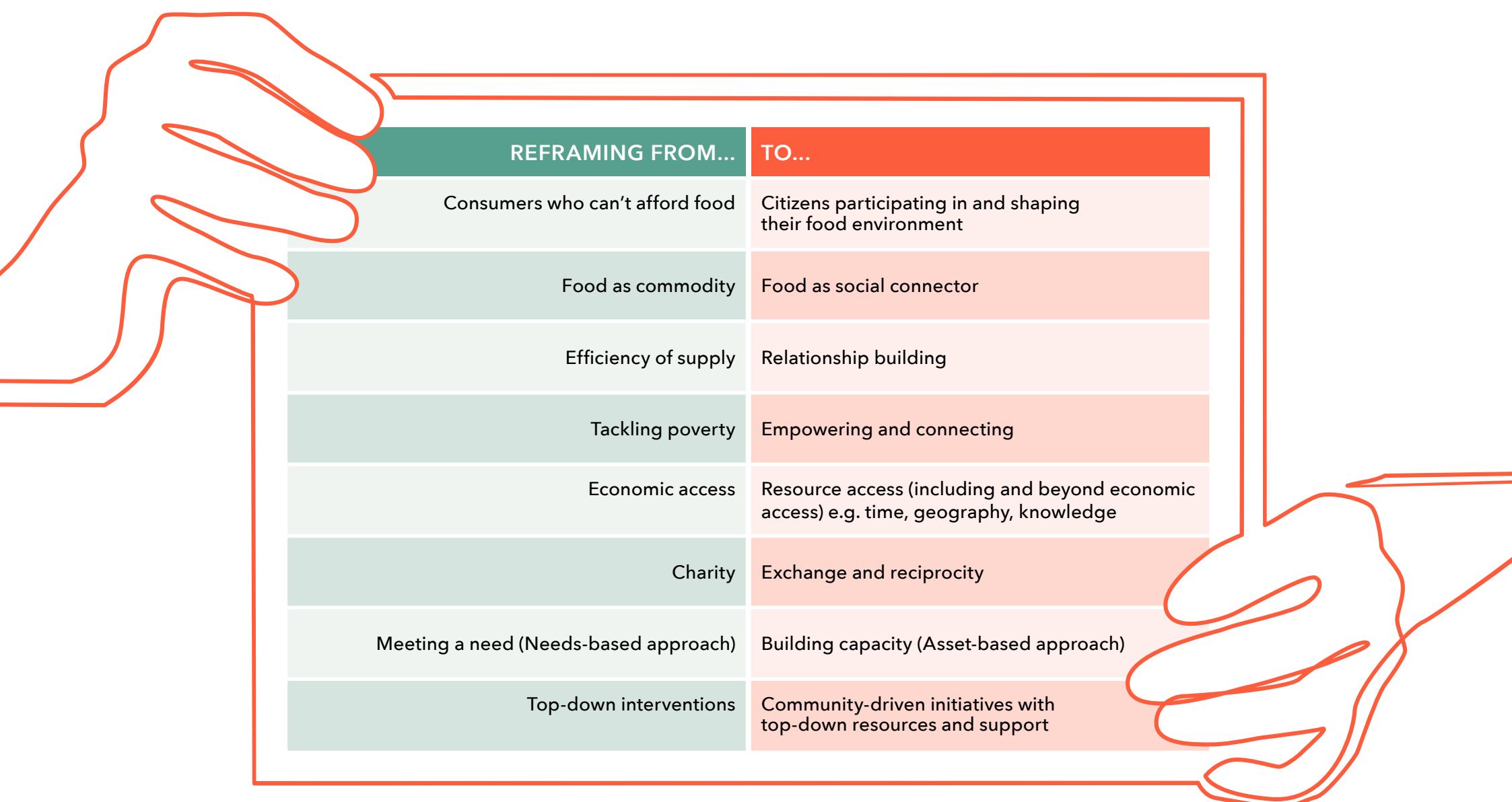
Bunker Roy's Barefoot College in India is another inspiring example of using "what's strong, not what's wrong" for community development and resilience. The barefoot movement is redefining professionalism and showing that anyone can teach, and anyone can learn, because we all have something to share with others. In fact, Roy says that at the Barefoot College, "the teacher is the learner and the learner is the teacher." What is taught is what people know, and the curriculum is as varied as the individuals.

The range of solutions this opens up will be much broader than financial support and food parcels alone. They will take into account the specific and diverse challenges faced by families and individuals experiencing hunger in each community, and are more likely to be sustainable for the long-term when they are not dependent on external input.

USEFUL TOOLS

The **Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)** method aims to connect individuals, organisations and institutions with those that have the strengths and skills each need, from within the community. As they say, "in community development you cannot do anything with people's needs, only their assets."

The shifts we need

REFRAMING FROM...	TO...
Consumers who can't afford food	Citizens participating in and shaping their food environment
Food as commodity	Food as social connector
Efficiency of supply	Relationship building
Tackling poverty	Empowering and connecting
Economic access	Resource access (including and beyond economic access) e.g. time, geography, knowledge
Charity	Exchange and reciprocity
Meeting a need (Needs-based approach)	Building capacity (Asset-based approach)
Top-down interventions	Community-driven initiatives with top-down resources and support

Where we can begin

Here are some questions to help you think about where you are at now and how you can integrate the shifts above.

The stories we tell

1. How do you refer to the people you work with? Do you call them residents, beneficiaries or clients? Are there other ways in which you can address them that might be more empowering? Phrases like 'community members' or simply just 'people' can help to break down barriers between 'them' and 'us'.

2. How much is your work emphasising what you are trying to build rather than what you are fighting against?

3. How would you describe your role in your community? How can you enable community action, rather than just provide a service?

The connections we make

1. Where do people naturally gather, within your space but also across your community?*

2. What makes people want to stay and talk to each other?

3. Who is responsible for making people feel welcome?

The power we share

1. What are the existing skills, knowledge and resources present in your local community?

2. Where and how can people in your local community share their ideas with you?

3. What gets in the way of your community members being more involved in your work?

USEFUL RESOURCES

The **food citizenship communications toolkit** highlights the shifts in language needed to start engaging with people as food citizens, and the traps to avoid in our organisation's communications.

Glasshouse Community Design has a broad range of publications on how to design spaces with people **here**.

Co-farm's codesigning process, including detailed questions asked to around 190 community members, can be found **on its website**.

Nourish Scotland's Guide to **Dignity in Practice** helps us understand how to centre dignity in community food initiatives.

*At a time when it is possible to gather safely, i.e. not during the peak of a pandemic

The journey of a thousand miles begins with… community

Changing the story in our minds sounds easy. Translating it into everyday practice takes time and energy. Community food organisations, and communities as a whole, need an empowering and supportive environment in order to engage more with people as food citizens. The role of business partners, local authorities, funders, charity partners, and governments, is slowly shifting to accommodate this transition. The first step in accelerating the journey to building food security and resilience is to question our current ways of working. Only then can we begin to identify opportunities to invest more into the citizen story, within our own individual lives, communities and organisations. For community food organisations, it is also about expanding your remit, and connecting with those organisations that can support you beyond food. Your work can use food as a way to engage people, but the impacts will go far beyond the provision of food itself. Food is often about care. About community. About connection.

Because hunger and hardship have increased in the UK, many more organisations are providing emergency food aid. But thinking of your organisation as an emergency food aid provider can in itself be limiting. Instead, why not consider yourself as a community food organisation? Even if your current objective is providing food parcels, your impact can be even greater and longer lasting if you focus on building long-term community resilience. Changing how you refer to your organisation may sound like a small step, but it can be a productive and important shift that encourages staff, volunteers, communities and other organisations to think and act differently.

What this new citizen story brings is a shift of the role of institutions and the relationships between them. How we frame our work, how we empower our communities, and how we connect with one another, are the foundations to strengthening our local communities – through networked organisations and resilient spaces, that allow communities to identify, connect with, use and enhance local resources to strengthen food security and resilience.

Foodhall
Sheffield

"The city for everybody is one made by everybody."

Foodhall is a community and cultural centre in Sheffield, with an award winning open public community kitchen, a 'contribute what you can' café, social art gallery, workshops, studios and wellbeing spaces.

Foodhall is purposely and carefully designed as a space for the community, or, more accurately, the many people from different backgrounds who come together under one roof at Foodhall. It works to tackle food waste and social isolation recognising that food can be a connector that brings all kinds of people together. Foodhall also encourages and empowers people to bring their own ideas to life. It's used for book launches, parties, bike workshops, music and craft classes and more besides.

Foodhall operates as far as possible without hierarchies, and certainly without the formal concept of givers of 'support' and receivers of it. People are encouraged to contribute what they can, which sometimes means time, labour or expertise and not just cash. Foodhall is intentional about this, believing firmly that everyone is of value and everyone has skills to share.

Set up with fluid roles between staff and volunteers and on democratic principles, Foodhall is intentional about decision-making by consensus, led by the people the decision will affect. It had to shift the way it worked as a response to the pandemic, when a more rigid structure was necessary to manage the huge increase in produce, services and volunteers. It is transitioning back to this looser, non-hierarchical way of working.

What does Foodhall want you to know?

• Meet the needs your community actually has. Ask what they are! Don't assume that you know.

• Work hard to lessen or get rid of the boundary between people who 'provide' a service and people who 'receive' a service. Be intentional about this.

• Make your space a place of connection. Some people may be experiencing poverty, and others may be lonely, or want to feel part of something. Work hard to treat these differing needs equitably, but make space for them all.

• Know and understand what else is happening in your area. Who can you work with, alongside or support? Is there another community café on the bus route? Can you agree which days you each will be open? Collaboration, not competition, is the way to resilience.

• Being fluid and flexible and making space to shift your approach to meet needs that may emerge is really important. Being adaptable is a key part of being resilient.

The people who make Foodhall don't see their role as solving poverty and household food insecurity. Their role is to bring people together in ways that are kind and supportive. In this way, it contributes to tackling food insecurity through connection, building resilience for individuals and communities.

Designing social spaces
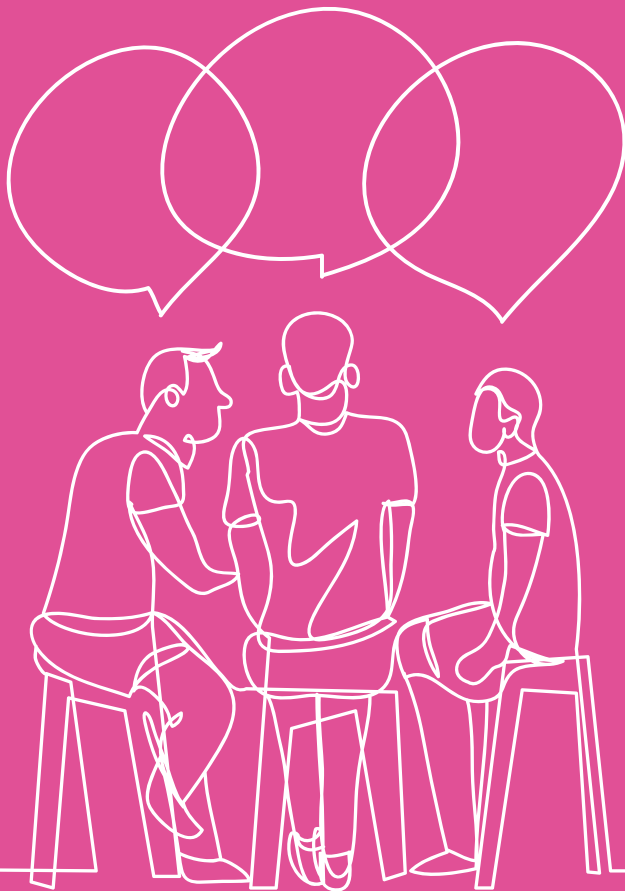
We've seen then that poverty is a social problem as well as an economic one. Social and geographical isolation, poor mental and physical health, loneliness, caring responsibilities: all these contribute to hunger, hardship and injustice. If we think of people only as consumers, we only acknowledge the economic dimension. Thinking of poverty in social terms as an issue of disconnection and disempowerment gives us space to look at root causes (why is it that people end up hungry?) rather than symptoms. This shift can be considered alongside food citizenship as vital for building organisations and networks that tackle and eliminate poverty for the long-term. It's crucial in building resilience.

Social connection is a key aspect of food citizenship. When people are brought together, new relationships are formed, information flows, ideas are generated. We are better able to look after each other and new possibilities emerge. Building on **initial workshops with organisations in Sheffield**, we interviewed community food organisations to get a sense of how they design spaces which foster social interaction, as one building block (amongst many) for building community resilience. Here are some things we learned in the process.

Slowing it down

How a space is designed and the way it feels when you walk in goes a long way to determine the kind of behaviours that take place within it. For example, a space which includes a small help-yourself tea corner might encourage people to have a cuppa and settle down for a bit, perhaps to start up conversation. Conversely, a place with no seating or bathroom would make that more difficult, and the space might seem more purely 'functional.' Some infrastructure changes will of course need capital expenditure, which can be hard to come by, but perhaps some will be possible with the resources you already have at hand.

Emergency food spaces already do so much more than provide food alone. Designed well, they foster social interactions, counter loneliness, and offer space to learn and share skills, stories and experiences. However, there is a constant struggle for organisations to design for efficiency versus designing for social connection. This has been heightened under the pandemic and social distancing restrictions.

Often the focus is on how to handle food: where it arrives, how to store it, how to manage stock, where to distribute it. Under austerity and between Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, community food organisations have been under increasing pressures. With this comes the risk of focusing more on the efficiency of food distribution, and accidentally neglecting investing in the social web that brings and keeps a community together.

Many emergency food spaces, especially during the pandemic, have been designed to get food in and out as quickly as possible for example by creating a one-way system for people using the service, formalising volunteering roles and packing larger parcels to serve a week rather than just a few days.

All these are important to ensure food distribution works well. However, can we re-think the spaces to see how effective they are at nurturing social interactions within communities and to encourage a shift away from models reliant on charitable food aid? This would allow us to bring people together through a shared sense of place and local community, rather than (only) through their shared experience of poverty.
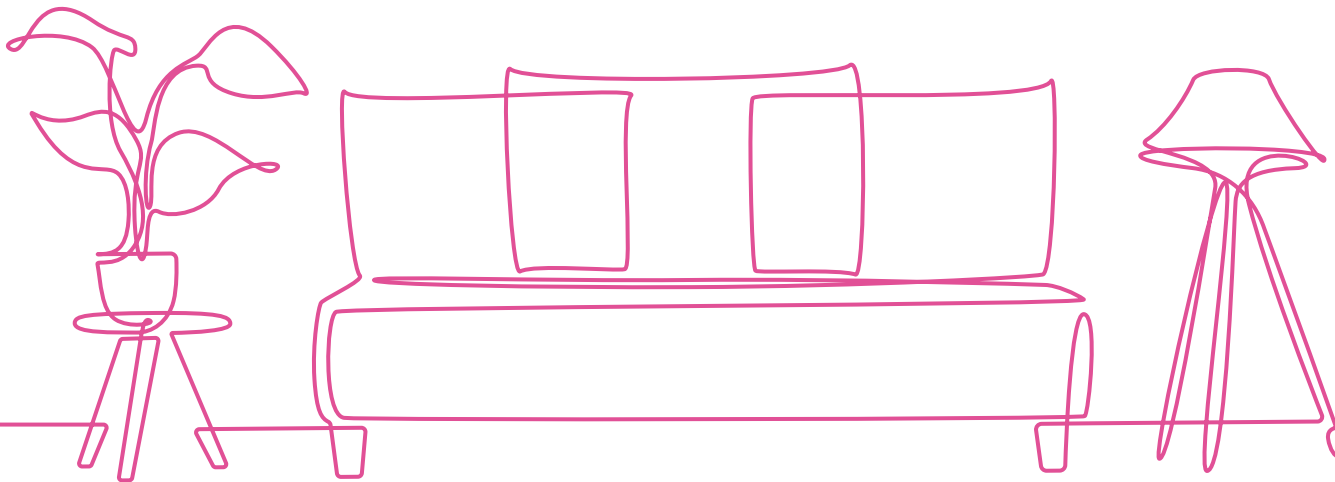
How can we design for connection?

One way to rethink community food organisations as social spaces, rather than food spaces alone, is to look at how people move about and through physical spaces like the community shop, cooking class, food bank or social café.

In order to remain as connected as possible, even under physical distancing restrictions, here are some things community food organisations we spoke to tried out to encourage social interactions and exchange:

Removing physical barriers as much as possible and creating open spaces (e.g. windows to see into rooms, cafes removing items that clutter counters)

Having offices as close together as possible with colleagues on hand when needed

Having a spot where people can wind down and have a quiet moment to look after their own social wellbeing

Having a physical place to come together as a team – even if it is simply having a space for staff or tea/coffee-making facilities in the corner of the room

Playing music and encouraging chatter to create a sense of buzz in the space

Having a quiet spot to chat with someone more privately ad-hoc. For example, if someone comes to your space distressed. Through listening and speaking to them, you are able to empathise, signpost, in some cases even translate/ be a spokesperson for that individual to the relevant social services needed

Having charging stations for mobile phones

Having someone who's chatty and can take some time to say hello to people or welcome them into the space

Note: the spaces we design are only part of the picture. When thinking about designing social spaces, remember to think about digital spaces too. During the pandemic, there has a been a big shift in attention to and use of digital communications, as people were no longer able to gather as before. We know that this digital shift has been scary for lots of organisations. Getting free support from networks like **The Catalyst** is a great place to start if you want to make sure your digital spaces are accessible, safe and easy to use.
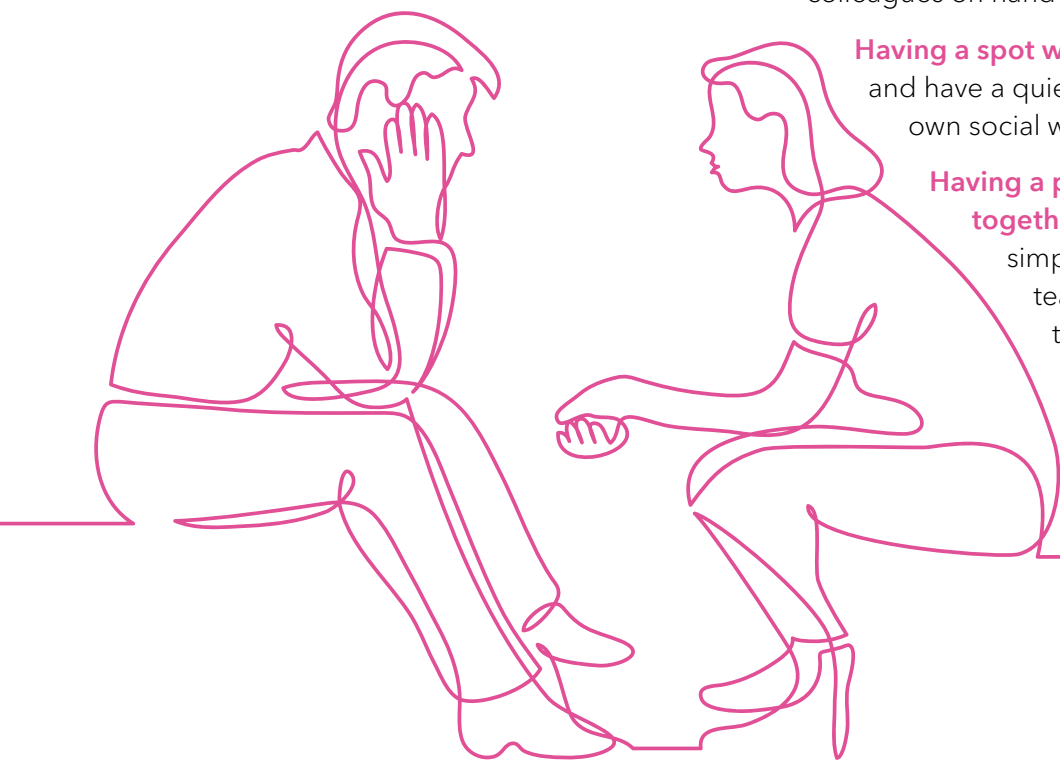
Mapping existing activities in your space

Before you begin designing your spaces to foster connection, take a look at what activities are already taking place in your space. This will of course be different depending on the context, including any restrictions on the amount of social interaction people can have e.g. physical distancing during the pandemic.

You'll need: a pen, paper.

Take 5 minutes to observe what everyone in the room is doing. Write a list of all the activities you see happening, for example charging mobile phones, having a chat, having a cup of tea, children playing, packing food parcels etc. Where are these things happening? What may be there already to encourage people to gather and join into the activity (it could be as simple as a set of comfortable chairs, or a kettle)?

Where are people most comfortable or where do they naturally gather? Where do people tend to linger? What is it about that area that makes it appealing for talking and hanging out?

You might want to add some more detail next to the items on the list. Did any surprise you? Could you get a sense of how the person doing the activity was feeling? Did they seem content or worried?

Take a look at the spaces you've got to work with. Are there rooms or areas that aren't so frequently used? Are they cold or draughty, or too warm and stuffy? Are they too open plan for quiet connection, or too private for feeling comfortable and part of something?

You'll want to do this 3-5 times, at different times of the day or week to get the most interesting results.

This is a way of quietly observing and recording what is happening, it's not about detailing who does what or pre-judging what you are seeing.
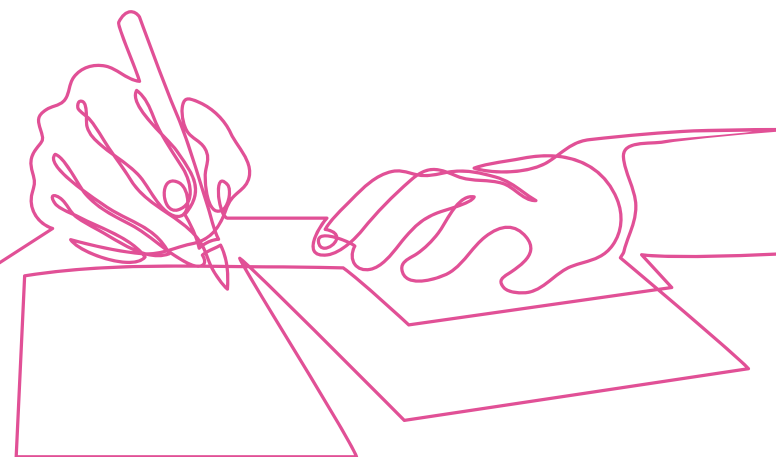
Principles for designing social spaces

Everyone is welcome

The best way of removing the stigma of coming to a space is to make it open, inviting and inclusive. When a space is designed to be a place of connection where everyone is equal, rather than a place people go to access services, people from different backgrounds and circumstances will feel welcome.

Flexible spaces

Sometimes you'll need a big space to come together as a group, and at other times smaller spaces are needed: for peace and quiet and reflection with a smaller group, or a private chat. This can be achieved with movable tables and chairs, having a variety of furniture – sitting chairs or comfy sofas, panelled walls or double doors to either link up two rooms or separate them.

Balance of quiet & lively spaces

Ideally you want to have quiet spaces for staff or volunteer 'downtime' or private spaces to chat, alongside more lively space for socialising, buzz and connection.

Promoting care and dignity

You want to create spaces which encourage care for your team and your community, and treating people with dignity.

Protecting and nurturing

Proper safeguarding measures should be in place, including everyone knowing what to do or who to talk to if someone approaches them for support which they are not equipped to give. This ensures everyone, staff included, is looked after.

Involvement

Identify staff or volunteers with lived experience and/or curious and empathetic personalities and then be intentional about the roles everyone plays. For example, ideally have someone good at welcoming people into the space to greet and show new people around.

Pride in the local community

The way the space looks and is decorated is important and can be a powerful way of embedding in the local area e.g. photographs/ paintings/ art from local residents showcased in the space and/ or the décor celebrating a particular geographical identity that the local neighbourhood is proud of.

Building on what works in your space

Mapping the physical assets you have is a great way to get a deeper understanding of how your space is used and what small or quick adjustments you can make to improve usage (in whatever way you see fit).

You'll need: a pen, paper.

Take ten minutes to note down the different physical things you have available.

- How many rooms do you have? What is in each room (e.g. a kitchen and a food prep area)?

- What activities happen in each room? What works well? What challenges are there (is there ventilation, is it too warm or cold)?

- Sometimes furniture ends up in a place to make room elsewhere. Can any equipment or furniture be moved? For what activities? How does this change the space?

- What activities require similar set-ups of equipment or furniture? Group them together into one space

- Are there any shared resources in your network?

Doing an exercise like this can help to make sure that you are making the best use of your space.

Use what you've discovered to think about the future: what activities would you like to introduce? Do you need anything to make this happen? Is it people and volunteers, or is it furniture and equipment? Often it's both.

As a first step try making some changes and see what happens. Start small, observe changes, adjust as you go. Remember, creating social spaces is an ongoing process. Our social needs as individuals evolve over time, and communities evolve over time. What works today doesn't have to work forever.
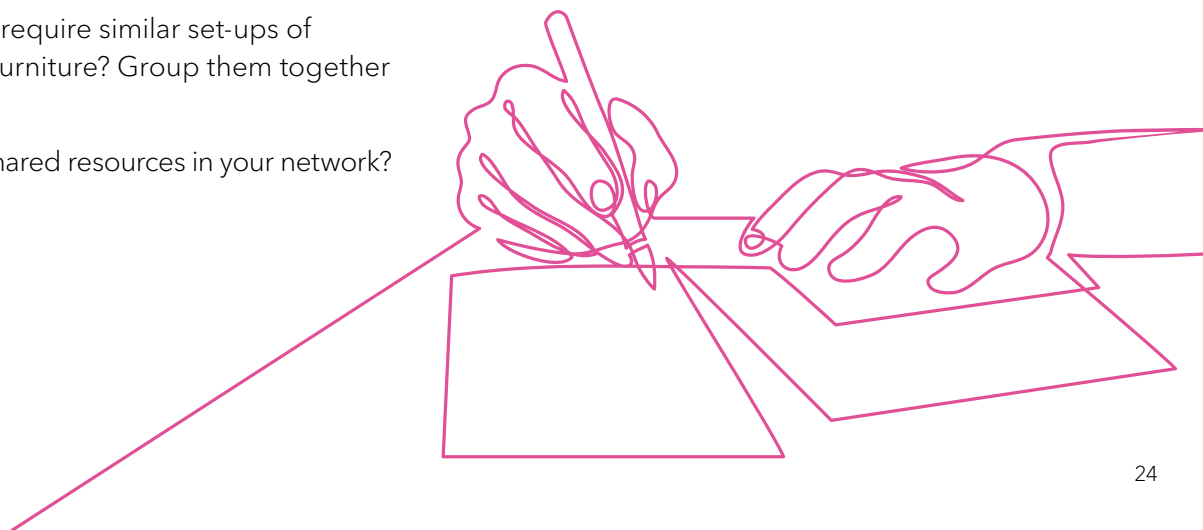
Co-creation of community spaces

The design of a place may determine whether or not community members feel empowered to help tailor the space to their own individual and collective needs and desires. Who owns the space, both legally and emotionally, and how that space is managed impact both on how people connect with a place and how involved they become in shaping it.

Some organisations talk of their role as looking after the space for the benefit of the community, making sure they are not precious as to how the space is used, so long as the community is happy with what it is used for.

Community members can become more emotionally connected and invested in a place when they are actively involved in designing, decorating or building a space, with the result that they will participate more with the space and look after it in the future. The process of co-creation can also help foster a stronger sense of community, with members forming deeper connections with each other around this shared project. What can this look like in practice?

Participatory City's **Tomorrow Today** campaign is trying to bring streets together by **sending out starter-packs for community-led projects**. From one-off events like a street party, to longer-term projects like open orchards, they encourage neighbours to collaborate and get stuck in to building the kind of streets and communities they want to live in.

Glasshouse Community Design is a national charity that supports communities, organisations and networks to work collaboratively on the design of buildings, open spaces, homes and neighbourhoods. They see design as a way to connect people and empower them with enhanced confidence, skills and a greater sense of agency.
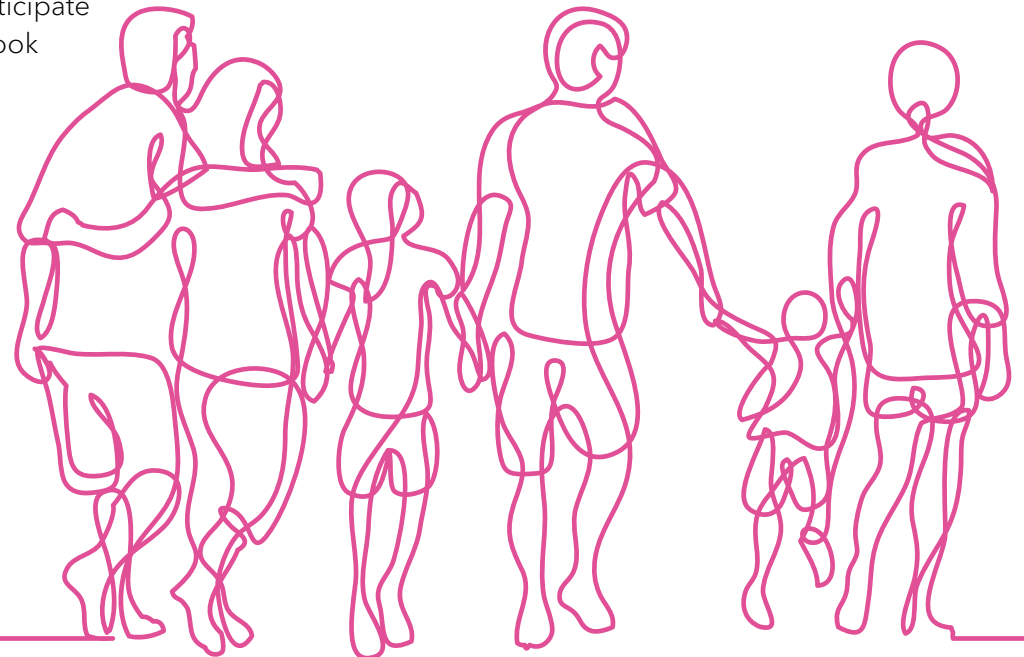
The role of space in building community resilience

Ultimately, community food organisations don't need to rebuild or totally redesign spaces to foster connection and community. Begin with observation, see what works in the space, speak to the community and listen to what they most respond to, or find most important. Then build on that, using low-tech interventions to bring their ideas to life. Think about the small changes that can lead to big shifts. Crucial in all of this is empowering and involving people in the community: to give a sense of ownership and comfort in a space, we have to start with what people want and what they need. We can only find this out by talking, listening and observing.

Connecting with the wider community

Beyond your own space, why not create connections in the community that you are part of – with other community organisations, with local authorities and local businesses? Partnering with and/ or coordinating activities with others, can make you realise you are not alone in wanting to build resilience in your community and can feel empowering. Thinking of your organisations themselves as citizens in the wider community, rather than as isolated entities, can really help.
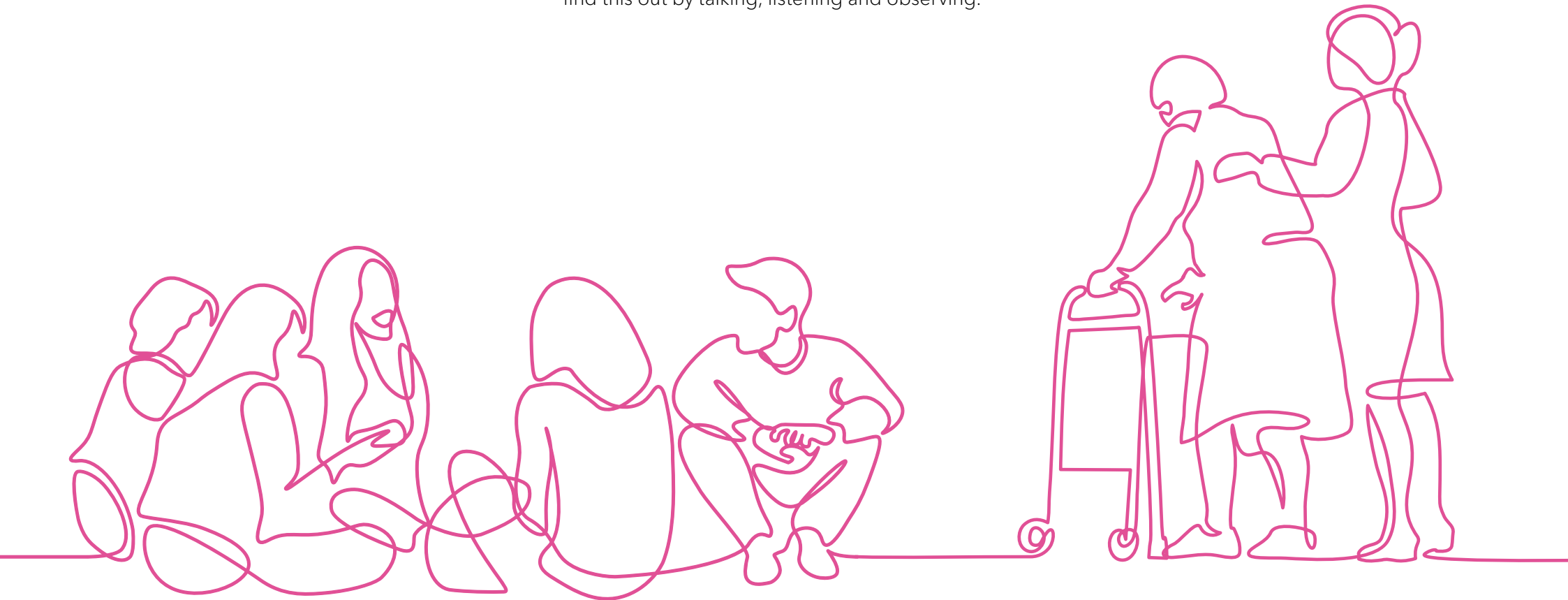
Citizen participation

Empowering participation doesn't have to be high tech or complex. Think about the people you want to hear from and consider ways that are most likely to reach, interest and energise them. Here are a few examples:

Citizens' assemblies are one way to ensure voices of the community are platformed and considered in decision-making. It is a format where a representative group of citizens are selected to deliberate on certain key issues with the intention of ensuring underrepresented voices are heard and collective decisions can be made. It can be used at community, local and national levels.

Positive Carrickfergus is a small but mighty Community Interest Company working to build community, promote civic led regeneration and increase civic participation so that Carrickfergus in County Antrim is a great place to live. Its Talk of the Town project is a brilliant example of how to involve and engage people in conversations exploring the future of their town, and their role in shaping it. One way they did this was by distributing thousands of postcards direct to households and encouraging residents to share their **wildest dreams** for the town. Everyone had a chance to give their view. Distinct from the formal consultations normally run by government or councils, the role of the postcards was as much to encourage thoughts and conversations about peoples' ideas and dreams as to collect formal proposals. The cards were one part of a multi-pronged effort to listen to local people and create space for people's own ideas.

Communities themselves can also be the inspiration for artwork that decorates a space. **Greener Kirkcaldy** in Fife bought their building for the community in 2017. To bring the community ownership of the space to life, two local artists were commissioned to create a mural for the building. The artists spent time observing the work that went on in the space and then interviewed residents, staff and volunteers about the building, the organisation and what community ownership meant to them. These conversations were the direct inspiration for the design of **the mural**.
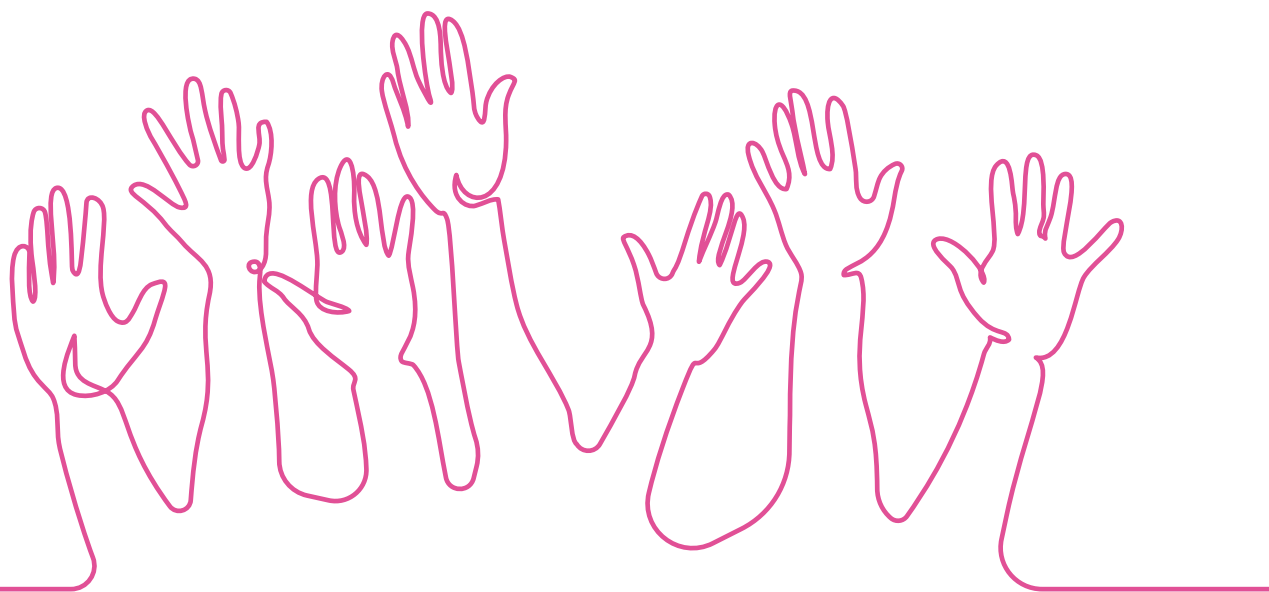
CONCLUSION

Giving food without considering the structural reasons 'why' food is needed is a never-ending battle. Building community resilience using food is a critical part of the puzzle to end hunger in communities and eradicate poverty. Food is a powerful tool for social change.

Through this project, we've learned that the most important thing is to encourage the conditions that empower people and communities to participate. We've talked about how telling different stories about food and poverty is critical to changing the narrative and the system. By considering poverty to be a lack of agency and control, the debate and the solutions are expanded beyond economics and what people don't have. Focus instead on what they do have, and on the ways that communities can be empowered, resourced and trusted to participate. By doing that, we can see some powerful tools and ways of working that will shift the story, and, in turn, the system.

Organisations of all shapes and sizes can be a platform for people to influence and create the change they want to see in their local communities. Communities know what they need best. What they often lack is the time, space, expertise, resources, and connections that are needed for local initiatives to develop, grow and thrive. When the conditions are right, and these things are freely available, people are empowered by their own actions to make changes in their communities.

We can see this brought to life by organisations like Nudge Community Builders and their brilliant **alternative shopping arcade** which houses local food initiatives, a bike collective, a radio station and more. The **Even Better Arbourthorne Project** at Arbourthorne Community Primary School, an initiative that develops and creates ways for the community and the primary school to make their area an even better place to live, is another powerful example. Children, parents, school staff and community members are empowered and supported to make change themselves, as people who can make a difference. Through initiatives like a micro-granting scheme, Growing space and Community Fridge, Family Feasts and Tree Planting, An Even Better Arborthourne is addressing root causes of hardship by investing in the assets of the community.

So, it is clear that community organisations play an important role in empowering local food citizens. The needs of our communities can help us prioritise, but it is the assets of our communities that need to be made visible to show us the way forward.

Of course, alongside how you design your own space and what you can do as an organisation, there is so much to be gained by considering yourself as a member of a community: a community of organisations working with similar aims, even if your methods are different or you work to support different people. Looking beyond your own space and resources to see what you can offer others working in the community, and equally, what they can bring to your work, will make for much more resilient communities than if each organisation stands alone.

Megan Blake's excellent work on Food Ladders articulates this point well: Consider how what the organisation is doing might intersect with projects from other locally-based organisations and determine where there are gaps in local support.

Ultimately, there will be many diverse needs within any community. No one organisation can meet them all. But by building awareness of what others are doing, connections with other organisations and relationships with the people involved, one single organisation can contribute to a collective that will be much more than the sum of its parts.

The now and the long term

In any conversation about building community food resilience, we need to talk about the emergency response (right now), and long-term resilience building (the future). Many interventions to tackle hunger and hardship currently, understandably, focus on the immediate need for food. However, unless the underlying drivers of poverty, injustice and food insecurity are tackled, emergency food providers and their support networks will always be chasing after an ever-growing problem.

Tackling the root causes is a gargantuan task. Alongside UK government initiatives such as Levelling Up, there are many other efforts and initiatives that place communities themselves at the heart of these solutions. The best of these highlight the interconnectedness of loneliness, mental health challenges and poor general health with the blight of hunger, hardship and injustice, and recognise that solutions must themselves be interconnected.

We note also the many important campaigns that aim to shift the systems that contribute to the desperate levels of hunger and hardship: including the Children's Right2Food campaign and the #Cashfirst movement, as well as calls for Universal Basic Income and/ or Universal Basic Services. These all provide necessary challenges to the current systems. Crucially community food organisations can and should play their roles as advocates for better food systems.

We hope this guide is a pragmatic tool that contributes to the resilience of community food organisations, and their ability to continue to support the communities they serve, beyond being a vehicle for emergency food aid. It aims to assess what can be done now despite the conditions still not being ideal to support community food organisations. Two years ago, when the Food Ethics Council began this work using food citizenship to explore long-term strategies to address household food insecurity, none of us could have foreseen the catastrophic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, communities and food systems. Community food organisations were and remain a crucial, core pillar of the response to the pandemic. Their role in feeding, connecting and caring for people was quite simply lifesaving. Changing the relationship that food businesses have with food charity is vitally important too.[7]

Looking ahead to an uncertain future, we should not accept the further entrenchment of charitable food aid in the UK and the UK government failing to meet its responsibilities to ensure people are fed well. Instead of papering over the cracks, let's build community food resilience together.

Endnotes

1   Food Ethics Council (2019) Harnessing the power of food citizenship [**link**]

2   Food Foundation, Food insecurity tracking [**link**]

3   Unwin J. (2018) Kindness, emotions and human relationships: The blind spot in public policy, Carnegie UK Trust [**link**]

4   New Citizenship Project (2014) This is the #Citizenshift: A guide to understanding & embracing the emerging era of the citizen [**link**]

5   Food, Farming & Countryside Commission (2021) Food Builds Community: From crisis to transformation [**link**]

6   The Guardian (2019) Could this local experiment be the start of a national transformation? [**link**]

7   The Food Ethics Council has explored the roles that food companies can and should have with food charity, and with addressing root causes of household food insecurity and poverty in a Business Forum series [**link**]

This report was published in March 2022.

Food Ethics Council