

Local food infrastructure and the cost of living crisis

SUMMARY

- Food insecurity levels increased by 57% between January and April.
- To alleviate the impacts of the cost of living crisis, there is scope to significantly scale up investment in local food infrastructure, and to better support local food partnerships.

Food insecurity levels increased by 57% between January and April.

- In April, 7.3 million adults lived in households that said they had gone without food or could not physically get it. These households include 2.6 million children.
- Since April the cost of living has increased markedly, putting household budgets under further pressure.
- Food is one of the most flexible areas of household spending. It is often the first place where families will seek to make savings when finances are tight.

The local infrastructure in place to support food insecure households is hugely diverse across the UK.

- **Local food partnerships** involving local authorities and civil society groups are now active in ~80 cities and towns across the UK. Many have been successful in developing stronger local food infrastructure. The *Sustainable Food Places* initiative has been supporting their development for a number of years. This model should be invested in longer term.
- **Community food enterprises** (such as social supermarkets, food clubs and pantries, food hubs, food banks, community restaurants and cafes) are all growing in number. They use a variety of models to provide access to low-cost or free grocery items for people in need, often harnessing food surplus from the supply chain (food which would otherwise have one to waste). Models which offer low-cost food which people can *choose* to buy are more popular and less stigmatising than food banks.
- **Community restaurants** – offering subsidised hot food in a social setting – represent a particular opportunity for investment in the context of the cost of living crisis and the rising cost of food and fuel. This model builds on the network of British Restaurants which were set up during the 1940s. A detailed briefing on the potential for community restaurants can be found [here](#).

There are many opportunities to better support local supply chains

Policies to better support local food infrastructure and enterprises include:

1. Creating a level playing field for small food businesses so they can compete fairly with larger businesses. In practice this means:

- Costing in the environmental impact of production systems and supply chains which are carbon intensive or which destroy biodiversity – i.e. the “**polluter pays**” principle.
- Removing **size thresholds** which prevent small producers from accessing government subsidy schemes.
- Reforming **public procurement** so that information reaches smaller suppliers, and reducing the size of individual contracts to allow small producers to tender.

Example: Bath and North East Somerset Council succeeded in doing this via a dynamic purchasing system. They introduced a web platform that allowed 60 schools serving 30,000 meals per week to buy from more than 20 local SME food producers and suppliers. The council evaluation found that the carbon emissions of their supply chain had been reduced and costs had fallen by 6%.

- Levelling the playing field on increased labour costs for **peri-urban growers** in major cities.

2. Ensuring there is sufficient infrastructure in place to support local food:

- The closure of small, local **abattoirs** is the classic example. Their closure has had a direct impact on the ability of small producers to thrive (Better Food Traders suggest investments in local infrastructure, such as this, could be supported through the Green Growth Fund).
- Improving **planning** policy e.g. allowing local people to have a stronger say over community assets and their high streets; creating a planning category which is specific to local food infrastructure.
- The closure of **County Farms**, which were historically a stepping stone for new entrants in farming to develop their businesses.
- Access to market **data** could increasingly be regarded as a critical part of the infrastructure needed to allow local food to thrive.
- Supporting regional infrastructure which can support **processing and distribution** (e.g. regional hubs).

3. Changing the definition of productivity for farming:

- Judging farming productivity by **how much energy or fossil fuel is used** to achieve a given yield, rather than by the labour used.
- When it comes to judging farm viability, perhaps it is more reasonable to see labour as an investment in the business and therefore on the balance sheet, not as a cost on the profit and loss account. Machinery by contrast is viewed as a depreciation charge on the balance sheet.

4. Providing various forms of financial and non-financial support, such as:

- Advisory services to help small businesses **navigate regulatory processes**.
- Actively supporting **apprenticeships** in agro-ecological growing.
- **Revenue Support Grants** for local authorities e.g. like the New Homes bonus, make land and premises available to urban/peri-urban farming and sustainable food distribution delivering proven public goods.

For more detail, listen to our [podcast on local food infrastructure](#).

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About The Food Foundation:

We are a young, dynamic, and impactful charity with a mission to change food policy and business practice to ensure everyone, across the UK, can afford and access a healthy diet, supplied by a sustainable food system. We are independent of all political parties and business. We work with others who believe there is a problem with the system and want to change it.