

# Community Responses to the Cost-of-Living Crisis

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## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the LSE Research and Impact Support Fund for generously funding this research, and Jessica Rowan for editing, proofing and formatting this report. Finally, we would like to thank the community groups and anchor organisations that we interviewed for sharing their time and experiences, and for the organisations across the country offering vital support in these challenging times.

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## Executive Summary

From May to November 2022, LSE Housing and Communities set out to understand the role grassroots community groups were playing in supporting people through the cost-of-living crisis. We wanted to understand who they were helping, the types of services they were providing, how needs have changed, the challenges they were experiencing, and what further support they needed to continue working in their communities. We also wanted to capture how larger anchor organisations were responding, and their relationship to community-level support.

We began our research by identifying community groups across the country offering cost-of-living related support. This built on our 2020 research on the rise of Mutual Aid groups, and also drew on social media, local and national newspapers, and local authority websites. In total, we identified 182 community groups providing cost-of-living related support, from which we selected 20 to be the focus of the study, representing different geographical areas and types of services. We also selected eight anchor organisations who were supporting people struggling with the cost-of-living from our network of contacts and desk based research.

The efforts that we uncovered were inspiring and valuable. These groups are playing a vital role in their communities, despite being mainly volunteer-led and having limited resources.

## Conclusions and recommendations

We know from our research and discussions with community groups and anchor organisations that the cost-of-living crisis is having a very real impact in communities. People are increasingly struggling to meet everyday costs, with many people coming forward for help that have never needed it before, and including increasing numbers of people struggling with in-work poverty. As energy prices increase further, we move into colder weather, and cost of food and other staples continue to rise, this situation is likely to get worse.

Community groups play a vital role in supporting people in crisis. Without these groups, many people would not have access to food, or basic necessities for their children. Community groups have a good awareness of the challenges local people are facing and can adapt quickly, offering new forms of support where needed. Anchor organisations are also providing much needed support. In order to make best use of resources and keep up with growing demand, these groups must work together, sharing resources and expertise. For example, a housing association may be able to provide a free venue and advice on the best way to manage a community group, and the community group may have a good knowledge of the gaps in service provision within the local area. Working in partnership can be mutually beneficial, as well as creating a more holistic support for service users. Community groups can also help each other by sharing resources and advice. Forums where local support providers come together would help build these relationships and ensure local resources are being used in the most effective and efficient ways. Oversight organisations such as the Trussell Trust and Your Local Pantry can provide this crucial oversight role, offering advice to groups and sharing learning.

All the community groups we spoke to were receiving referrals from statutory organisations, and often provided support that these services were unable to. However, community groups are not centrally funded and should not become a stand in for statutory support, rather they should work as part of a network of service offers.

This vital work is predominantly being provided by volunteers and relies heavily on donations. This is even the case for the work of the anchor organisations. It is important that volunteers feel properly supported, valued, and are not overworked. Training to help volunteers cope with more difficult situations, and regular reflective sessions may help avoid burnout.

Funding is a challenge for community groups, and this is likely to get worse as demand for the groups' services continues to grow as the cost-of-living crisis deepens. Groups need stable, long-term sources of funding to help cover core costs such as bills, transport, and staffing. More stable funding would also act as a buffer against the drop in donations that many groups are starting to experience.

As well as the emergency support provided by many of the groups to people in need, it is important that people are helped to change their situation and be lifted out of poverty, through money management or debt advice. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult. Groups report that many people are now claiming all of their eligible benefits, are sticking to a budget, or are in work, but they simply do not have enough money to cover essential costs.

Whilst the work of these community groups and anchor organisations is crucial, it is not enough on its own to solve the longer-term roots of the cost-of-living crisis. We need an overhaul of how wages, benefits, and the economy work to tackle the wider problems of poverty, low incomes, and rising costs.

## 1. Introduction

The cost-of-living crisis is affecting households across the UK, many of whom are increasingly struggling to meet day-to-day costs, including energy, food, transport, and other essentials. With limited state support to address the crisis, households are turning to community groups and other anchor organisations for basic provisions, such as food and clothes. This research builds on LSE Housing and Communities' earlier work on the role of mutual aid and community during the COVID-19 pandemic (Benton and Power, 2021). Many of the organisations being relied upon during the cost-of-living crisis came to the fore during the pandemic and have now shifted their focus to dealing with the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis. This research aims to capture the experiences of these organisations, to understand the type and scale of support being offered, how needs have changed, how groups have adapted, and what further support organisations need to maintain capacity and reliance in the face of ever-increasing demand.

### i. Why are we in a cost-of-living crisis?

Since late 2021 the UK has faced a cost-of-living crisis, caused by steep rises in the prices of energy, food and other costs, coupled with a fall in real incomes due to very high inflation. This has come about from several factors.

During the pandemic, inflation fell as many households cut back on day-to-day spending. When lockdown restrictions eased, demand grew rapidly but many businesses could not keep up with this rising demand as they had cut back on staff and investment during the pandemic. This was exacerbated by supply chain issues caused by continuous lockdowns in China. This combination led to a rise in inflation.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused a surge in oil and gas prices, pushing costs up further for businesses and individuals. Ukraine was one of the world's biggest exporters of wheat, sunflower oil and maize, so the invasion also caused a global shortage of basic foods which has increased inflation further (Institute for Government, 2022).

The Office for National Statistics reported inflation reaching a 40-year high in June 2022 at 10.1%, then falling slightly to 9.9% in July. The Bank of England predicted that inflation would reach 13% by the end of 2022 (CIH, 2022).

Research by the Institute of Fiscal Studies shows that poorer households are facing a greater rate of inflation. They estimated, in April 2022, the annual inflation rate for the poorest 10% of households was 10.9% compared with 7.9% for the richest 10% of households. This is because energy costs make up a greater proportion of lower-income households' budgets (Karjalainen and Levell, 2022).

Food campaigner Jack Monroe argues that inflation is even worse for those on lower incomes, as the price of basic food items has increased more than more specialist ranges, and in some cases cheap products have stopped being available altogether. In reaction to this, the ONS is changing the way it measures "consumer price statistics" to better reflect the buying patterns of different groups.

*"In 2012, 10 stock cubes from Sainsbury's Basics range were 10p. In 2022, those same stock cubes are 39p, but only available in chicken or beef. The cheapest vegetable stock cubes are, inexplicably, £1 for 10. Last year the Smart Price pasta in my local Asda was 29p for 500g. Today, it is unavailable, so the cheapest bag is 70p; a 141% price rise for the same*

*product in more colourful packaging. A few years ago, there were more than 400 products in the Smart Price range; today there are 87, and counting down” (Monroe, 2022)*

Furthermore, lower-income households are less equipped to deal with rising prices due to a lack of savings. According to the JRF, one-third of people in the poorest fifth of households have savings of less than £250, compared to one sixth of the overall population (Barry, 2022).

These changes are being felt in the general population. Data from the ONS found that 9 out of 10 adults reported an increase in their cost-of-living in March 2022, compared to just 6 in 10 in November 2021 (Chapman, 2022).

## ii. Benefit changes

There have been a number of benefit changes over recent years that have led to a reduction in household incomes. As a result, the basic rate of benefits is at its lowest in real terms for 40 years (Butler, 2022):

- The benefit cap, first introduced in 2013, limits the total amount of benefits a working age family can claim. The cap was lowered in 2016 and rates have been frozen ever since. This equates to a real terms reduction to the benefit limit of 28% (Waters and Wernham, 2022).
- In 2017, a two-child limit on benefit payments was introduced, meaning families would no longer receive a benefit increase for third and subsequent children (DWP, 2021). The Institute for Fiscal Studies calculates that when fully rolled out it will impact 750,000 households, who will each lose around £3,600 a year (Waters and Wernham, 2022)
- People applying for, or moving onto Universal Credit, have to wait five weeks between applying for Universal Credit and receiving their first payment, leading to increased use of foodbanks, rent arrears, and other problems (Klair, 2020)
- Local Housing Allowance rates have been frozen since April 2020, meaning benefit payments no longer keep pace with rising housing costs. Rates were frozen based on the bottom 30<sup>th</sup> percentile of local rents.
- In April 2020, a £20 a week uplift to Universal Credit was introduced to help households during the COVID lockdown and was a lifeline for many families. In October 2021 this was removed, and research by Citizens Advice calculated this led to an 11.5% real terms reduction in Universal Credit payments compared to 2013 when UC was first introduced (CAB, 2022). Households on legacy benefits did not benefit from the £20 uplift.

## iii. The impact of the cost-of-living crisis

It is important to consider what the cost-of-living crisis means in practice:

### Energy Costs:

Research by the ONS has found the proportion of people struggling to pay energy bills increased from 17% in November 2021, to 23% in March 2022. In the most deprived areas this increased from 25% to 34% over the same period, compared with rises from 10% to 17% in the least deprived areas. This data was collected before the April 2022 increase in energy prices. Research by the University of York predicted that, without Government intervention, nearly three-quarters of households would be in fuel poverty by January 2023, under a definition of fuel poverty as spending more than 10% of net income on fuel. Households in



the poorest and coldest regions would be worst impacted: 80.5% of households in Yorkshire would be in fuel poverty compared to 69% in London. Larger families and pensioners would be worst affected. The research calculates that 90% of these households would be living in fuel poverty. These calculations take into account the £400 bill reduction households will receive between October 2022 and April 2023 (Bradshaw and Keung , 2022). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has warned that rising energy costs will have a damaging impact on the incomes of low-income households, with the average low-income family being forecast to pay four and a half times more for energy in 2023/24 compared to 2021/22 (JRF, 2022).

### **Food:**

The Trussell Trust<sup>1</sup>, distributed 2.1 million emergency food parcels between April 2021 and March 2022, an increase of 14% on the same period in 2019/20, and 81% increase since 2016/17 (The Trussell Trust , 2022). This figure does not take into account independent food banks. Research by the Independent Food Bank network reported that 90% of their members saw an increase in demand since April 2022 (Independent Food Aid Network , 2022)

### **Mental and physical health:**

The cost-of-living crisis is having an impact on people's physical and mental health. Research by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) found that two-thirds of mental health therapists cited the rising cost-of-living as a reason for declining levels of mental health in the UK. 52% of therapists reported that clients are struggling to sleep due to worrying about rising costs, which can have a knock-on effect on their ability to cope with daily life (BACP, 2022). Research by the Childhood Trust surveyed 2000 parents and found that 34% reported their children raising concerns about the rising cost-of-living, and for 8% this had led to an increase in angry behaviour. 7% reported their children smiling less and 7% said their children appeared more distant (McLain, 2022). NHS leaders have warned that without greater intervention the cost-of-living crisis will have a negative impact on people's health with people forced to make the "awful choice between skipping meals to heat their homes or having to live in cold and damp conditions'. 10,000 deaths a year are already attributed to cold homes, and this expected to rise (CIH, 2022).

Research shows that experiencing poverty in childhood can have long-term impacts on an individual's physical and mental health, with children who have grown up in poverty experiencing higher levels of cardiac disease, certain cancers, and mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and substance misuse (Fell and Hewstone , 2015).

### **Geographical differences:**

The cost-of-living crisis is not being felt equally across the country. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which surveyed 4000 households in the lowest 40% of national household incomes, found that low-income Londoners were the worst hit and most likely to be struggling with the cost of energy, food, and services, with 66% of low-income London households going without essentials compared to the national average of 59%. After London, low income households in Scotland, the North and the Midlands were most likely to be going without essentials. Low-income households in these areas make up a larger proportion of the total population: in the North, 46% of the population are in the bottom 40%

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<sup>1</sup> The Trussell Trust is a charity supporting a network of foodbanks across the UK, providing emergency food parcels in crisis situations.

of earners, compared to 34% in London. While Londoners are most likely to be behind on their energy bills, 23% compared to the national average of 16%, people in Scotland are most likely to be unable to keep their home warm, at 36% compared to the average of 27%. This is explained by the lower energy efficiency of the housing stock in Scotland and colder temperatures requiring higher energy use (Elliot, 2022).

### **Poverty:**

The Institute of Fiscal Studies calculates the number of people in absolute poverty is projected to rise from 11 million, or 17% of people, in 2021/22 to 14 million, 21%, in 2023/24. 30% of children will be living in poverty – the highest rate since child poverty peaked in the 1990s (Corlett and Try, 2022). These findings are supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, who found almost a third of children were living in poverty in 2019/20, following a steady increase since 2012/13. 68% of working-age adults in poverty live in a household where at least one adult is working. This rate has never been higher, and has increased gradually from 50% in 1996/97 (Barry, 2022).

#### **iv. What support is the government offering?**

In May 2022 the government introduced a number of policies to help support struggling households (Treasury, 2022):

**Cost-of-Living Payments** – Everyone who receives Universal Credit, Income-based Jobseekers Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit and Pension Credit received £650, split across two payments, one in summer and one in autumn. This payment was tax-free and didn't count towards the benefits cap.

**Pensioner Cost-of-Living Payment** – All pensioners received a one-off payment of £300 to help with rising energy costs this winter

**Disability Cost-of-Living Payment** – Everyone who receives Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payment, Attendance Allowance, Scottish Disability Benefits, Armed Forces Independence Payment, Constant Attendance Allowance and War Pension Mobility Supplement received a one-off payment of £150 in September 2022. This payment was tax-free, and didn't count towards the benefits cap.

**Household Support Fund** – A total of £1.5 billion has been distributed to local councils to support families struggling to meet basic costs such as food, clothing and utilities. Each local council runs their own scheme and people must apply directly to the council for support.

**Energy Bills Support Scheme** – All domestic energy customers in the UK will receive a £400 grant towards their energy bills, this will be split into six payments between October and March 2022.

**Raising National Insurance Contribution thresholds** – From July 2022 the level at which people are required to start making national insurance contributions was increased to £12,570, meaning the average working person will save £330 a year.

**Universal Credit (UC) taper rate and work threshold** – The amount people can start earning before their UC payments are affected was increased by £500 a year. The taper rate which is the amount your payments are deducted by over this level has decreased from 63% to 55%, meaning that for every £1 over the threshold you will now lose 55p instead of 63p.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies stated that these new measures will now mean low-income households are “approximately compensated” for the rise in the cost-of-living, and some low income households will be better off this year than last year (Emmerson, 2022). However, these packages will have different impacts across households, for example, a large family with three or more children will see their energy bills increase by over £500 but will receive the same payment, accounting for a small percentage of their total spend (CIH, 2022). There are arguments that these measures do not go far enough. The July report on energy pricing from BEIS stated:

*“While we welcome the Government’s May 2022 support package, it is no longer sufficient to respond to expected price increases come October. The Government must immediately update its support, targeting this at customers who are on low incomes, fuel poor, and in vulnerable circumstances, and develop a scheme to support vulnerable customers to accelerate the repayment of energy debt resulting from this crisis”.*

The Child Poverty Action group criticise the measures for not offering a long-term solution to the challenges people are facing:

*“If the chancellor is serious about supporting those who are struggling then he will need to make long-term changes to the structure of the social security system and restore the value of benefits to something that families can really live on.”* (CPAG, 2022)

#### v. Our Research

Whilst there has been some support from government during the cost-of-living crisis, many households continue to struggle to meet essential costs. This report explores how non-government services, organisations, and charities are supporting households through the crisis.

We began our research by identifying community groups across the country offering cost-of-living related support. This built on our 2020 research on the rise of Mutual Aid groups, and also drew on social media, local and national newspapers and local authority websites. In total we identified 182 groups, from which we selected 20 to be the main focus of the study, representing different geographical areas and types of support. Due to the small, informal nature of many of these groups, it was sometimes hard to make contact with organisers, and we selected groups where it was possible to identify leading actors.

We also identified 30 anchor organisations which have stepped up to support people struggling with the cost-of-living. Organisations were identified through our existing links with housing associations, our contacts in the field, and through web-based research. We carried out interviews with key organisers from the groups and, where possible, carried out site visits to see the service in action and to speak to volunteers, staff members and service users.

## Definitions

*For the purposes of this report, **community groups** are defined as locally based organisations working to meet the needs of their community. These groups are predominantly volunteer led, founded by local people and often informal in their structure, adapting to local needs.*

*We define **anchor organisations** as larger, more established organisations often working across a larger area or the whole country. These organisations have paid staff, more stable funding, and more formal structures in place.*

In addition to our research, we also held a knowledge-exchange Think Tank in October 2022, at Trafford Hall: *“Plugging the Gaps: How can we support communities through the cost-of-living crisis?”* This Think Tank brought together anchor organisations, community groups, larger charities, and social housing residents, all of which were responding to, or feeling the effects of, the cost-of-living crisis. This Think Tank highlighted some of the key challenges affecting organisations working to alleviate cost-of-living pressures, such as volunteer retention, funding challenges, and rising demand with limited resources. The final Think Tank session was an action planning session, where participants could utilise the learning from the Think Tank to develop action plans and solutions to problems facing their local communities. The findings from the Think Tank are available in Annex 1.

In the following report, we look first at the role of community groups tackling the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis, and then move on to the support provided by anchor organisations.

## 2. The Role of Community Groups

### i. How are community groups responding to the cost-of-living crisis?

Community groups have always played a vital role in supporting their local communities. This was particularly clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, when 4300 Mutual Aid Groups were set up across the UK. Research by LSE Housing and Communities highlighted the significance of support offered by these group, providing food, friendship, and other practical support to people who were isolated. Many of these self-help and mutual aid groups identified people who they believed were in need of support before the pandemic, and that would continue to need support beyond the initial lockdown phases. As a result, they wanted to carry on providing support as the pandemic subsided (Benton and Power, 2021). Research has found that 41% of these groups are still active, and that many have transformed the way they offer support, becoming more formalised and targeting services in certain areas such as food provision (Hall, 2022). In addition to these mutual aid groups, there are an estimated 2572 foodbanks in the UK (Francis-Devine, Irvine and Gorb, 2022), as well as numerous other small, informal grassroots groups working to support their communities.

These groups are increasingly relied upon to provide support to vulnerable people, and many are struggling to keep up with demand. Research by the Independent Food Aid Network found that 91% of its members saw demand rise from July 2022 to October 2022, and half of the groups said they may not be able to support everyone who approached them, or will have to reduce the size of their food parcels (Independent Food Aid Network , 2022). The Trussell Trust report that their members have had to buy three times as much food as they did last year to keep up with demand, as donations, which they traditionally relied on, are no longer keeping pace.

This research is based on qualitative interviews with 20 such community groups. We aimed to uncover the role they were playing in supporting households through the cost-of-living crisis, the type and scale of support provided, and the kinds of people that were being helped. We also asked groups what further support they needed to be able to maintain capacity in the face of growing demand.

## ii. Forming a picture of the groups

The following table provides a summary of the 20 groups we selected for interview. This is followed by a more in-depth breakdown of responses to our interviews.

*Table 1: Summary of 20 community groups providing cost-of-living related support*

Name	Area	Main form of support provided	Number of volunteers	Numbers of beneficiaries per week
Birmingham Change Kitchen	Midlands	Food	27	410
Chorley Buddies	North West	Food, loneliness, and isolation	64	520
Eastend Flat Pack Meals	Scotland	Food	3	150
Hartlepool Baby Bank	North East	Baby provision	14	120-150
Hornsey Food Bank	London	Food	80	700
Hygiene Bank, Thanet	South East	Toiletries	1	Hard to calculate
Kids Bank Chester	North West	Clothes and equipment for children	27 and 2 paid posts	50
Leighton Linlade Helpers	East	Food, loneliness and isolation	75	120 food parcels
Margate Food Bank	South East	Food and toiletries	70 and 1 paid posts	700-800
Oasis Community Pantry	South West	Food, helping people stay warm, youth activities and loneliness and isolation	40 and 2 paid posts	200
Our Kitchen	South East	Food and loneliness and isolation	10 and 3 paid posts	250
Oxford Mutual Aid	South East	Food and toiletries	200 and 5 paid posts	250 food parcels
Pudsey Community Group	Yorkshire and Humber	Food, clothes for children, helping people stay warm, loneliness and isolation, youth activities	40 and 3 paid posts	100
Secret Angels	Midlands	Food, toiletries, IT Support	30	98
Slung Low Theatre	Yorkshire and Humber	Free activities	3	110
Splott Community Volunteers	Wales	Food and loneliness and isolation	18	80
St Albans Food Bank, Wolverhampton	Midlands	Food	10	12 food parcels
Sustainable Merton	London	Food and helping people stay warm	50 and 2 paid posts	150 food parcels
Tremorfa Pantry	Wales	Food and youth activities	12	150 food parcels
Uniform Bank	Yorkshire and Humber	Clothes and equipment for children	26	290

### iii. What support do the groups offer?

The twenty groups we spoke to supported people in different ways, with some groups offering more than one type of support. The most common form of support was food provision, which 15 groups provide. Groups have different ways of organising the distribution of food to service users. Eleven of the groups provide food free of charge, while five groups charge a small amount, for example £3 to get £25 worth of food. This contribution-based “pantry” model increases the sustainability of the group, as they can buy in food and are less reliant on donations. As well as providing much needed free or low-cost food, ten of the groups help to reduce food waste by distributing food that would otherwise be thrown away.

Most of the groups provide support directly to people in need, but three of the groups (Thanet Hygiene Bank, East End Flat Pack Meals and Birmingham Change Kitchen) liaise with other community groups who distribute the provisions on their behalf.

Five of the groups set out to tackle loneliness and isolation within the community by providing activities and social spaces that bring people together. Four groups provide free toiletries; in three cases this was alongside food support, and one organisation exclusively focusses on providing toiletries. Four groups provided free clothing and equipment for babies and children.

As well as their main functions, all of the groups we spoke to had links with other local support structures where they would signpost people for additional help if needed, for example money advice and debt management. Furthermore, whilst not the designated aim of the groups, they also provide important social contact for the people using their services. One group leader said the queue to receive food was almost the only social contact people had all week and that it was a good opportunity to meet and chat to other people.

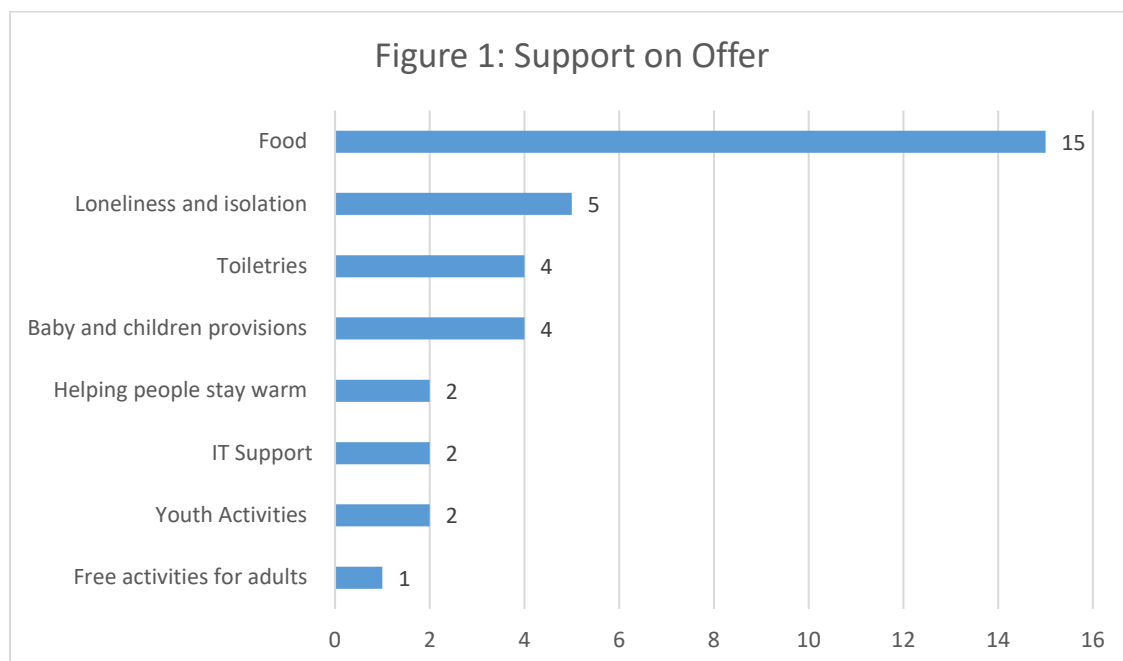


Figure 1: Support on Offer

#### iv. Who are the groups helping?

All of the community groups we interviewed support people struggling to meet everyday costs. The majority help anyone who needs the support (16), with no criteria to meet before being granted support. Four groups target their support specifically at children and babies; two groups organise a project working to specifically help elderly people; and two groups run projects specifically for people experiencing homelessness. Some groups had parallel projects working with other targeted groups, for example one organisation included both a general needs food provision and a specific project to help homeless people.

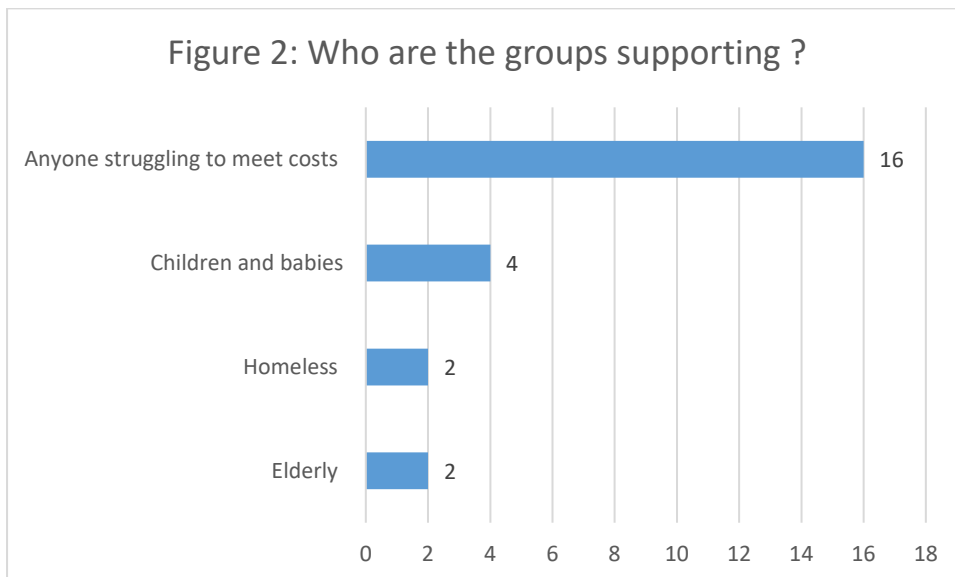


Figure 2: Who are the groups supporting?

Groups have different views about whether they should require referrals, and how long they will offer support for. Out of the seventeen groups that directly help people in need, 14 accept both self-referrals and referrals from external agencies, and two groups only help people who have an external referral. One group will provide clothes for people who self-refer, but for larger items such as cots they require external referrals, and if someone self-refers more than twice, they require an external referral to ensure that a larger organisation is aware of their situation and that they are receiving other support. Groups who choose to accept self-referrals based this decision on their aim to not create extra barriers for people asking for help. The groups that require external referrals want to ensure the people they are supporting are linked into wider services that can help them to change their situation in the long-term.

*“We do have referrals from the money advice team, health prescribing things like that. I know that some people cut you off after a set amount of time. It’s a difficult decision, we will help anyone who asks. I don’t want to make a decision to say no, and then you have heard something has happened to them”*

Founder, Secret Angels

All but two of the groups provide ongoing support to people if needed. The groups all have people who attend every week, while other users receive help for a few weeks while they are in a crisis situation. Three groups limit their food bank support to just four weeks, unless a new situation arises meaning the service user needs additional support. For one of these groups, when the food bank allocation comes to an end, they encourage people to join their



food pantry scheme<sup>2</sup>. The groups who limit support in this way made this decision so as not to create an overreliance on food banks, and also to ensure there is enough food to go round.

#### v. The role of volunteers

All of the community groups that we interviewed were volunteer-led. The groups varied in size, from one volunteer to 200 volunteers. Seven groups also had paid members of staff. These roles were introduced once the groups had become established, and they felt they could no longer meet demand without more permanent oversight. The paid staff were previously people who volunteered with the group, several of whom had been out of work for a long period of time prior to taking on these paid roles.

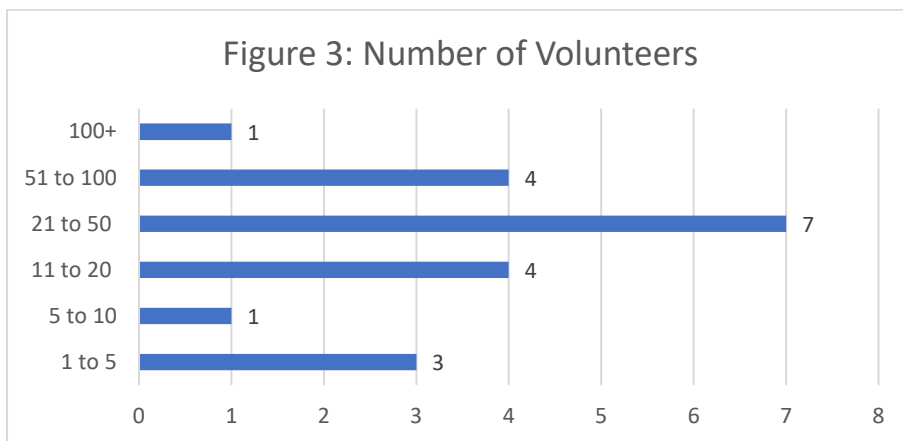


Figure 3: Number of Volunteers

Volunteers were recruited using a variety of methods, the most common being word of mouth (12). Eight groups had volunteers that either had previously accessed support or continued to do so. Seven groups used social media to recruit volunteers and two groups posted on volunteer recruitment sites.



Figure 4: How are volunteers recruited?

<sup>2</sup> A food pantry is a place where people pay a low cost for a larger amount of food, for example £3 for £30 worth of food. Often this is surplus food that would otherwise be thrown away.

Talking to the volunteers and organisers, it is clear that being part of the group brings benefit to their own lives. They say that volunteering gives them a sense of purpose and allows them to meet new people. One volunteer described the group as a “safe space” where everyone felt free to talk about their problems and support each other. There is also huge pride in making a difference to people’s lives. However, some volunteers talked about the emotional toll and sacrifice of personal time that being involved in community work entails.

*“Volunteering is so rewarding, everyone that comes to us says it’s probably the best thing that has happened to them. They get such a reward from it”*

*“It brings me joy, it brings me despair, it’s a rollercoaster. The weeks are hard, the weeks are long. But then this week we have helped 8 new families”*

## vi. Motivations for forming the group

All the groups are motivated by wanting to support the most vulnerable people in their communities, offering both practical and emotional support. Eight of the groups were set up during the first COVID-19 lockdown to help local people who were struggling to access food, or do essential activities such as picking up prescriptions due to shielding. Since forming, these groups have become more formalised and their support has become more targeted; for almost all the groups their most significant offering is now food distribution.

The rest of the groups (12) were set up before the pandemic. Six of these groups were motivated by wanting to address food poverty and being aware of high numbers of people locally who were unable to afford food. Two groups just wanted to do anything they could to help their community. Two interviewees had seen television programmes about families living in poverty which motivated them to take action. One group was aware of local people struggling to provide for their children, and the founder of the hygiene bank was struck by people being unable to afford toiletries and thought this was the best way to help.

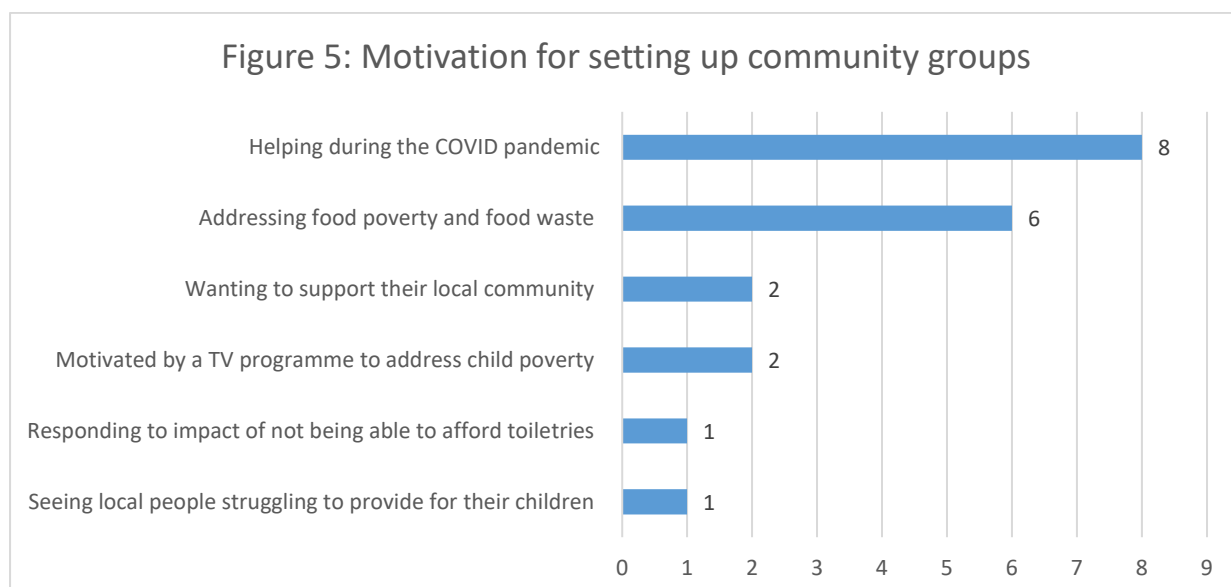


Figure 5: Motivation for setting up community groups

*“The group was formed originally as the emergency response to the pandemic, we came together to support the emergency services. We knew lockdown would affect lots of people so we came together primarily as a food bank. At the start none of us knew what lockdown*

*would look like. We were really concerned elderly and sick people would just have no access to food”*

A volunteer at Leighton Linlade Helpers

*“I watched a TV documentary about 11 years ago called Poor Kids commissioned by the BBC to look at 5 different areas around the UK and how poverty was affecting them. One of the children was from Leicester and he had to wear his sister’s school uniform to school. Even though they didn’t particularly talk about that, it just really struck me. I thought surely there must be grants out there for families that are struggling. So I googled it and In 2010/11 we were into austerity and one of the things councils cut straight away was support for school uniform and that was the case in my local area. I thought there must be something we can do there must be lots of school uniform we could use”*

Founder, School Uniform Bank

### vii. How have needs changed?

All the community groups interviewed have seen an increase in demand over recent months, which they attributed to the removal of the £20 uplift in Universal Credit, the April and October 2022 increase in energy prices, and the general rise in the cost of everyday goods.

*“The first week we had 5 people collecting [food] for a total of 15, last week we had 200 collecting for 700 people. Its mind blowing”*

Group Leader, Hornsey Food Bank

*“We have now seen an increase, yesterday’s session was 42 families, and we used to see 6 or maybe 12. Before COVID, 30 was a busy week, we now see north of 100 every week”*

Group Leader, Hartlepool Baby Bank

Participants spoke about different ways they have seen needs change over recent months. Seven volunteers said they increasingly spoke to people unable to afford basic food items, and five said people were struggling to afford to heat their home or cook food. Five interviewees said they were often seeing people where there was nothing they could do to increase their income: they were already budgeting well, working, and claiming all the benefits they were entitled to. They simply did not have enough money to live on. Five volunteers said they were increasingly seeing people who were in work but needing support to meet essential costs. Three people mentioned that the support they were offering was no longer short-term emergency help, but had become part of people’s routines as households struggled to cope week after week.

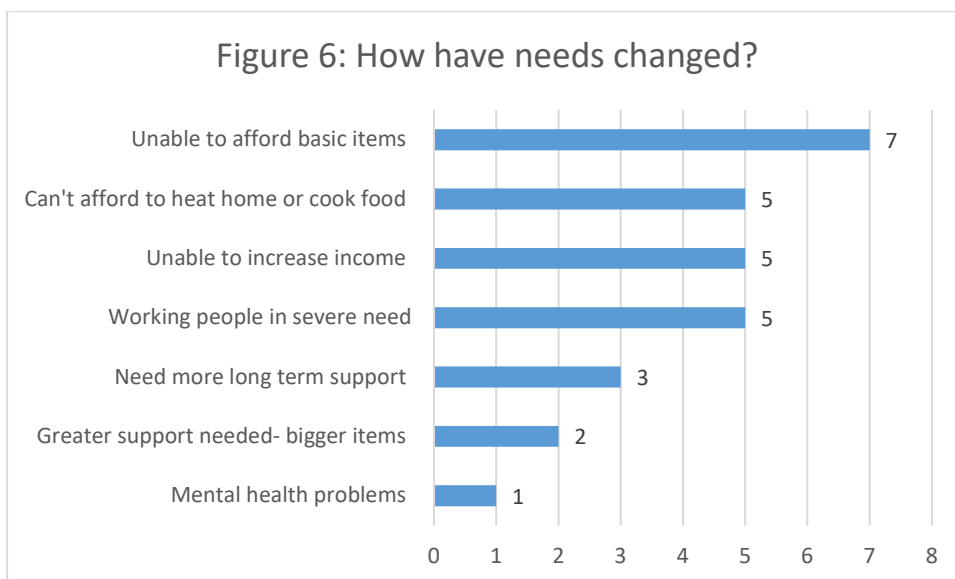


Figure 6: How have needs changed?

*“We are currently providing food parcels in three times the amount than we did during lockdown. The cost-of-living crisis is a massive, real deal. I don’t care what the politicians say, they are not at the coal face receiving the calls. People in work are experiencing in-work poverty and they can’t afford to put petrol in their cars to get to work”*

Group Leader, Leighton Linslade Helpers

*“The need is ridiculous. You get a lot of people that are put onto universal credit and they have five weeks with no money, it’s crazy. We have got people saying they can’t afford to put the heating on or the oven so they need things they can cook in the microwave”*

Group Leader, Tremorfa Pantry

As well as seeing a growth in service users’ needs, three groups have seen a drop in donations, which they attribute to the wider population having less spare money available. Kids Bank said it was seeing families who used to be able to donate items that they no longer used now selling those items to make up for the increase in prices.

#### viii. How have the group’s adapted support? Can they keep up with demand?

All the groups that we interviewed have made adaptations to the way they work to improve the day-to-day running of the service they provide, and to keep up with growing demand. Eight groups have identified new needs within their community and stepped up to offer different forms of support, such as a toiletries bank and energy vouchers. Seven groups have introduced paid staff as they felt running the group was too much pressure for a volunteer, and the volunteers could no longer offer as much of their time unpaid due to their own increased living costs. All of the paid staff members had originally been unpaid volunteers. Seven groups have taken on additional volunteers to help meet demand. Six groups have changed how they distribute and allocate food, to ensure they can help as many people as possible, and to make best use of volunteer time.

Six of the groups have adopted a formal structure, either becoming a charity, a Community Interest Company (CIC), or a formally constituted group. This helps the group run more efficiently and makes it easier to apply for external funding. The two groups that became

CICs chose this over becoming a charity, as they felt becoming a charity would limit their ability to adapt to changing needs and campaign on political issues.

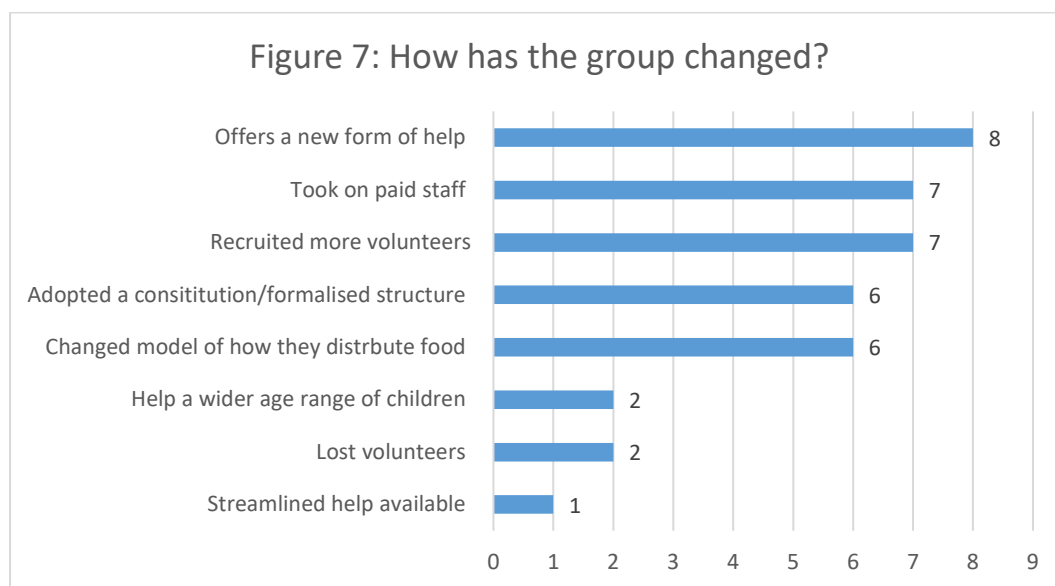


Figure 7: How has the group changed?

### ix. Future plans

All the community groups that we interviewed want to go on supporting their communities, and have plans to adapt what they are doing to meet rising demand and changing needs. Six groups are planning to offer new forms of support to help people cope with cost-of-living related pressures: this includes energy vouchers, teaching people to save money within the home through fixing and mending, sharing cost-saving tips such as how to make homemade, cheap cleaning materials, and setting up a social club tackling loneliness and isolation. Four groups are using their existing model to set up bases in other areas to support more people. Some groups are also making changes to their day-to-day organisation, including finding new ways to transport food, working with other local organisations, changing how they allocate provisions, and finding a new venue.

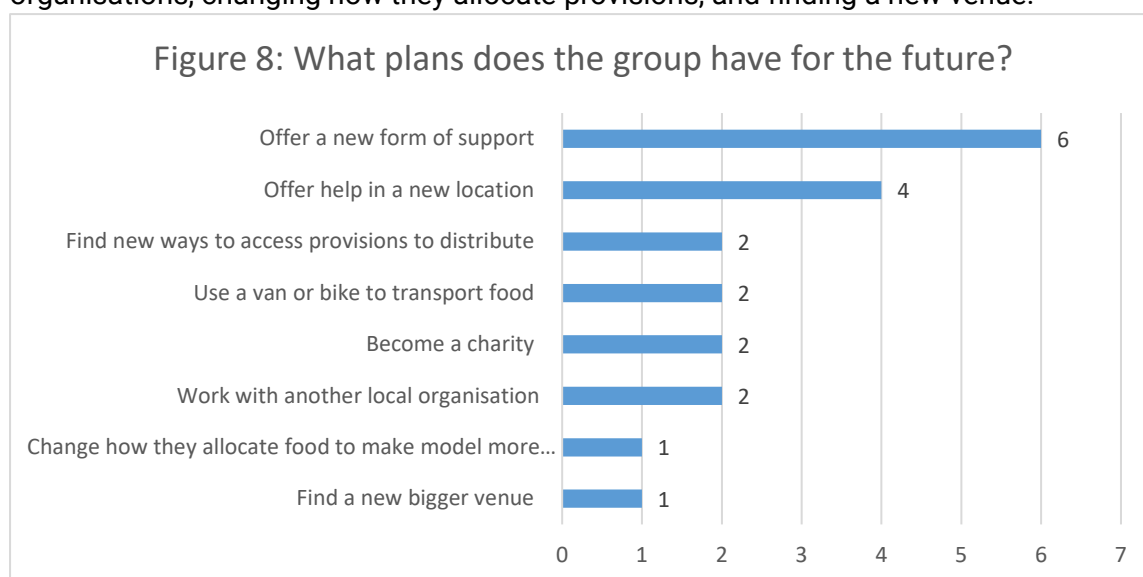


Figure 8: What plans does the group have for the future?

*“We have decided to do a roadshow, a bit like a job fair. We will pop in places around Cardiff and take it [food] to the people around all the different housing estates. There are so many people that are still nervous to leave their street, so we will go to them. We will give people information about where you can get free food, how you can make cleaning products for cheaper, it’s not rations but it’s going back to basics. Making and mending clothes, how to recycle things into something new, how to fix furniture and cook from scratch”*

Key Organiser, Tremorfa Pantry

*“Well we have resisted opening up other kids banks because we prefer for people to do it themselves, however the sheer demand we are receiving from Elsmere Port has led up to start planning to open a hub now. We go sort of 15/20 miles but we have been getting requests for help out of our area but if we open up in Elsmere Port we can serve people further up the country”*

Founder, Kids Bank

#### x. Funding the groups

Funding is a significant challenge for the majority of the groups, with only four of the twenty groups describing their funding as “sufficient”. These were the groups that had managed to secure funding for paid members of staff, who then had capacity to apply for grants and organise fundraising.

*“Funding is always a challenge, we have got enough for the moment but we are doing projections based on the increase and the cost of food, it has practically doubled what we are spending on food”*

Lead Organiser, Hornsey Foodbank

Groups are funded in a variety of ways, with the majority of groups having more than one funding method. Fundraising and donations, and some level of grant funding from external funders, were the most prevalent forms of funding. A challenge of grant funding is that grants are often for very specific targets, and do not cover general running costs or overheads. Five groups have received funding from their local council, and two groups are supported by the council in the form of a free venue to use. Two groups receive funding from their local church.

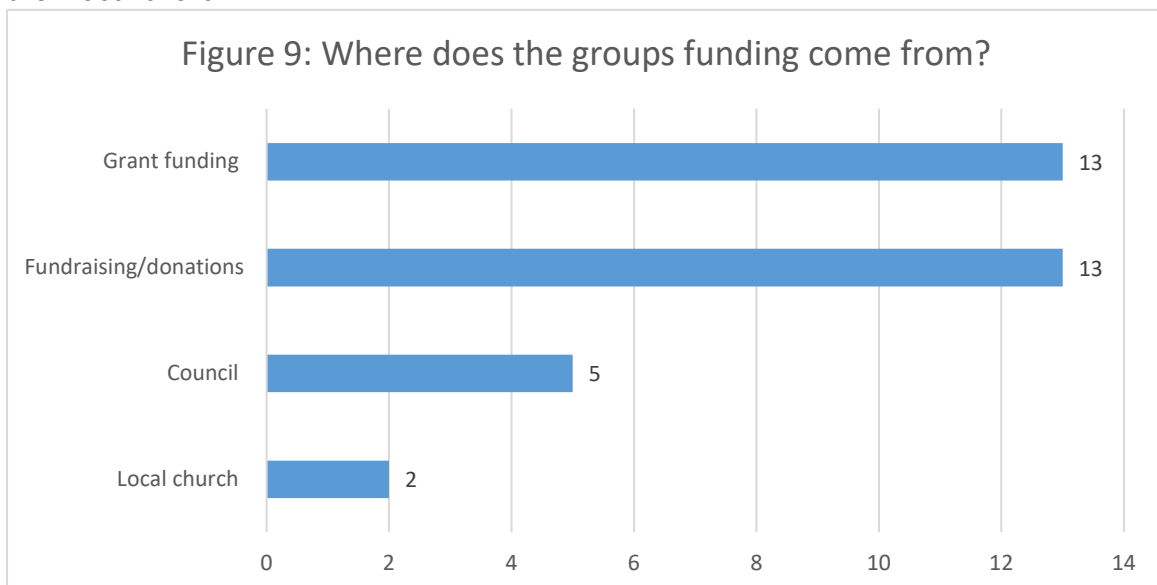


Figure 9: Where does the groups funding coming from?

*“Funding is a challenge, we are looking at doing an application to the Community Lottery Funding, so hopefully we will get some funding to go towards the food. We are looking at more long-term funding now”*

Founder, Secret Angels

### xi. Working with other organisations

All the groups we spoke to worked with other organisations in some way or another. They all received referrals from other organisations, apart from Birmingham Change Kitchen and the Thanet Hygiene Bank, who operate as the distribution point for provisions: Birmingham Change Kitchen prepare meals which are then handed out at food banks and other community groups, whilst Thanet Hygiene Bank collect toiletries which they then deliver to groups such as food banks and women’s shelters to distribute to people in need.

Groups that do receive referrals take them from organisations such as housing associations, GPs, social services, and schools. Nine groups said they had links with other local organisations which they can in turn refer people to for support that they do not provide, for example debt advice or grief counselling. Five groups share resources with other local groups, such as sharing food between food banks. Three groups provide support to other local groups and charities, for example the Secret Angels collect items for the local homeless charity. Three groups are part of networks of local groups campaigning to tackle poverty.

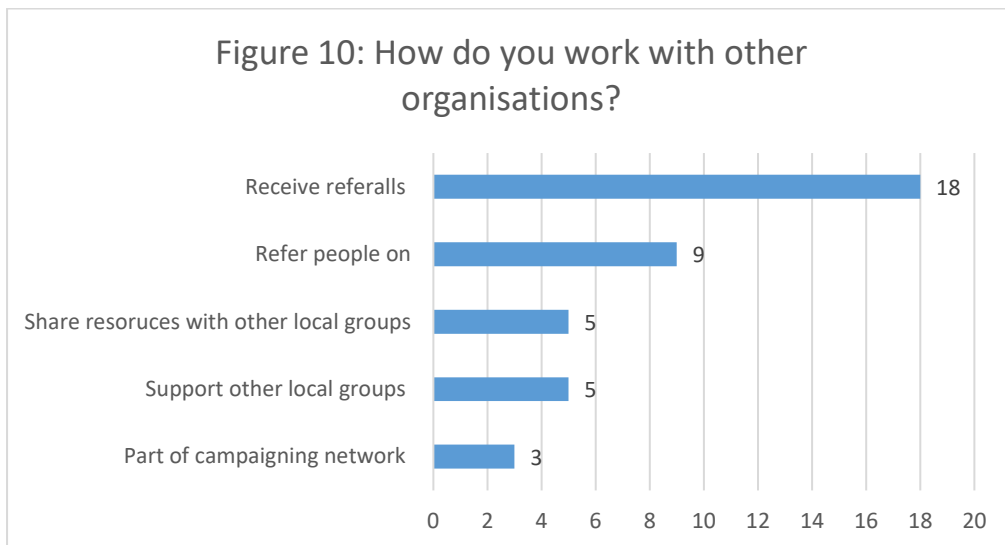


Figure 10: How do you work with other organisations?

### xii. What more do the groups need to continue supporting their communities?

We asked the community groups what they need to help them continue providing support during the cost-of-living crisis and into the future. A majority of the groups said they needed more long-term funding to cover core costs such as rent, utility bills, and staffing which are often not covered by grant funding. Six groups need more space to store all their provisions. Five groups need more volunteers to be able to offer help to everyone who needs it. Three groups need a van to help them transport provisions, as they are currently reliant on volunteers’ cars, which limits the quantity of items they can collect. There was a feeling

among groups that government and councils should acknowledge the vital support these groups are offering and offer more practical support on space, transport, and core funding.

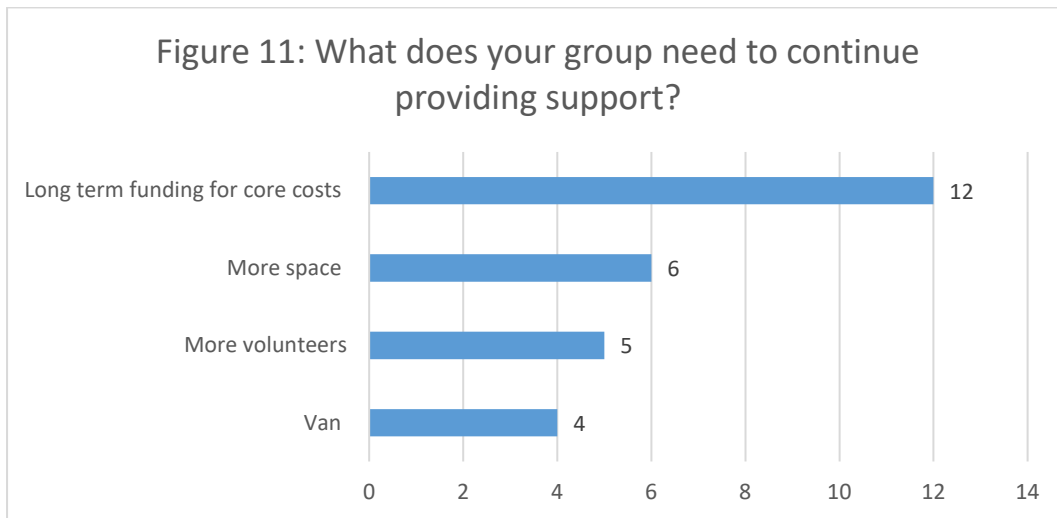


Figure 11: What does your group need to continue providing support?

*“The big ticket item would be a van, up until now one of the volunteers has a van but his van is too small now and that gets expensive. So we need to buy a van and that’s where the funding problems come in. For the five clubs we are going to need at least a part time member of staff. So that’s a challenge for us before now and the end of the year”*

Key Volunteer, Chorley Buddies

*“Grant making trusts will support you for projects they won’t support core costs like electric and gas. That’s the hardest thing for us. Governments and local authorities should recognise that groups like ours provide a tremendous service to the community, and there should be more support for core costs”*

Leader, Pudsey Community Group

*“If the government said we will give you X funds that would be fantastic, it doesn’t even need to be a large amount it just needs to be consistent. We work with people like social services, these people have funds but it is not enough so they can’t share with us. But I am providing beds and cots every week for social services. If the government could guarantee us £5000 every year, it’s not a huge amount of money, but then I would know my nappy bill would be paid for the year and it would mean we could plan. There is no security”*

Founder, Hartlepool Baby Bank



### xiii. Concluding Thoughts

We know that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of community groups around the UK supporting communities through the cost-of-living crisis. Our research sets out the motivations, organisation, and challenges facing twenty such groups. They are all motivated by a desire to solve local problems as best they can. They have an acute awareness of local need, and they have the ability to adapt and offer new forms of support where needed.

The groups are helping people meet basic needs, from food to clothes to toiletries, and are being relied on by statutory services to do this, highlighting the lack of other provision. All of the groups have seen a significant increase in need over the past few months, and expect this to continue. Groups are concerned about how they will keep up with growing demand. They need more stable funding for core costs in order to do this.

Volunteers value being part of the groups, as it helps people build support networks, develop skills, and in some cases, return to paid work. They take a strong sense of pride from helping people in urgent need. However, many volunteers are making huge sacrifices to their personal time and often deal with situations which can be upsetting.

In comparison with the volunteer groups we spoke to during the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, these groups are generally more formally organised, many having become charities or Community Interest Companies. They have generally streamlined the help they are offering, and have better systems in place to manage volunteers and donations. Groups also have developed relationships with larger organisations they can refer people to for additional support. However, these larger organisations are also facing similar challenges in the lack of long-term funding and a rise in serious affordability problems affecting growing numbers of households.

Community provision of essential services, such as food provision, baby and child items, and other forms of support, are increasingly relied upon by statutory services, and have become established within the wider welfare system. However, they cannot solve, nor mitigate, the cost-of-living crisis by themselves. It is only by tackling the roots of the crisis that the situation will improve and reduce pressures on households, and on community groups.

### 3. Detailed Case Studies of Community Groups

#### Useful Terms and Definitions

**Food Bank:** A place where people in need can receive food free of charge.

**Food Pantry or Food Club:** A place where people pay a low fee for a large amount of food, for example £3 for £30 worth of food. Often this is surplus food that would otherwise be thrown away.

**Fareshare and Incredible Surplus:** Organisations that collect surplus food from supermarkets that would otherwise be thrown away and redistribute it to community projects.

#### i. Birmingham Change Kitchen

A week before the first national COVID-19 lockdown, several community groups came together to form the Birmingham Change Kitchen to help ensure everyone who needed food would be able to access it. They knew people were already struggling either due to supermarket shortages or because they were shielding, and were concerned that existing food banks would no longer be able to run once the lockdown was implemented. The group set out to provide hot food to vulnerable adults twice a week, as well as providing specialist packages that only needed cooking with a microwave or kettle.



*Meals ready to be delivered*

Birmingham City Council funded a lot of the initial work through the Emergency Food Response Fund. Building on this work, the groups formed the Food Justice Network to put pressure on the local and national government to provide better and more sustainable food provision.

Birmingham Change Kitchen now prepares 400 meals a week that are distributed through various community groups across the city. Since the first lockdown they have cooked over 65,000 meals. They also prepare around five to ten emergency food packages each week. Most of the food is surplus food supplied by Incredible Surplus. However sourcing surplus food is becoming increasingly difficult and they wish they could offer people more choice with the food they provide.

The group have noticed a large increase in need since the pandemic, with people who have never previously needed help now accessing the service. They are also increasingly being relied on by the Council to provide food for people in need.

*“All the services are run down so much and at the same time cost-of-living is going up. It’s terrible that Birmingham City Council doesn’t have another way of dealing with this, when social workers see someone that needs food there is nowhere the council can turn to other than the third sector. I am not blaming the council, I know their funding has been cut, but it’s not right”*

The group haven't received any funding since June 2021, and often cover costs with their own money. They feel like they have to carry on providing the meals because of the desperate need people are in.

*"We do a lot of this without any funding, we use our own money. This isn't our job. But we do it because we can't not, we are a very poor small organisation ourselves, we are doing it out of ethical reasons"*

The group currently has twenty five volunteers, but at the height of the pandemic they had 250. They would love to have more volunteers and to be able to fund training to help support them. They are open to anyone that is willing to help. For some volunteers, being part of the group helps them cope with their mental health issues. They also have volunteers who are refugees, frustrated with their immigration status and not being able to work. Volunteers are recruited via social media and word of mouth.

The group know their work is impactful for local people and find the work rewarding, however they are angry that the work is needed and the government aren't doing more to solve the problem.

*"I am really glad we can do it and I am proud of it, I think it's putting a positive impact on something that is terrible. But there is a side of me that is really angry and I do see some really terrible things. So the emergency food parcels go to people who haven't eaten all week and you think how in the fifth richest country in the world, how can a family not eat for a week"*



*A poster attracting more volunteers*

## ii. Chorley Buddies

Chorley Buddies was set up in first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic as a phone buddy service for people struggling with loneliness and isolation. A member of a church group sent round a few emails on the 15th March and the phone system was in place by the 21st. Later on, the group set up a shopping service and medication delivery to help people unable to leave their homes. The group still offers the shopping, medication, and phone buddy service. They have also set up “Activity Buddies” for people struggling to re-socialise after the lockdowns; they offer five classes each week and some social events to encourage people to leave the house and do some gentle exercise. At the start of the pandemic the group had ten volunteers, they now have sixty and say they never have any problem recruiting volunteers for new projects, with lots of people who receive help subsequently offering to volunteer.



*A poster advertising the Food Club*

Most recently they have set up three “Food Clubs” to help people cope with the rising cost-of-living, and have plans to open two more.

Members pay £4 each week and get around £20-£30 worth of food, all of which comes from surplus food that would otherwise go to landfill. Food is collected from supermarkets and provided by Fareshare. They advertise the Food Clubs as a way of protecting the environment and reducing waste, and not as a poverty measure. They thought this would encourage people to join who may be ashamed to ask for help. They have noticed a noticeable increase in people needing help, with people queuing from nine in the morning to collect the food. Some people have said they like being in the queue because it is the only social contact they have in the week, but they also think it might be putting some members off, so they are looking at ways to solve this.

*“We advertise the food clubs as an environmental thing saving food that would go to landfill, so not a poverty thing. The reason for doing that is people need help that would never have thought they would need help or gone to a food bank, but because of budgets getting stretched they now need help. So with it being environmental people can join and hold their heads up high and not be stigmatised in anyway”*

The Food Clubs currently have 120 members, with the average household size being three. They estimate they are helping around 360 people a week, which will increase to 520 when the two new clubs open.

The phone and shopping services do not require any funding, while the Activity Buddies programme is funded by a grant from Sports England. They are aiming to make the Food Clubs self-sustaining. Each week they make around £120 profit once they have covered the cost of the food. This money goes towards hiring the halls and paying for van hire. However, as need increases, the group feel they will not be able to keep up with demand. They want to be able to access funding that would provide them with their own van and a paid member of staff to help with organisation.

*“A lot of the people coming to the Food Club are parents that work and they are still finding it very hard to make ends meet, and god knows what’s going to happen in October when the bills go up again. For us we really need long term funding, for a van and a paid member of staff”*

When the group formed they thought they would just run for a few months, and never imagined they would still be providing support years later.

*"We thought this was just short term, we thought lockdown was going to be for three months and here we are 2.5 years later. It's good we have been able to respond but it's shocking that in a country as rich as Britain these things need to happen. We should be completely ashamed of ourselves"*

### iii. East End Flat Pack Meals

East End Flat Pack Meals was formed in the East End area of Glasgow by a group of seven mums who were concerned about food poverty in the local area. The group provide meal bags that include all the ingredients to cook a healthy, nutritious meal for a family of four. The group also provide cooking lessons to help teach people to cook low-cost nutritious meals. The bags are valued at £3 each, and in most cases other local organisations will pay the group to provide the bags for people in need. People can also buy the bags directly as a way of accessing low-cost food. Housing associations also refer people to the group for support. When the group comes across someone who is really struggling, they will always try and provide the food for free. Each week the group help 150 people through the meal bags scheme. Alongside their main work, the group have been paid to provide an eight-week cooking course for families with children under five through an NHS-funded programme "5 under 5". East End Flat Pack Meals also currently provide the catering for Scottish Sport Futures summer outdoors programme.

During the pandemic, the group distributed food packages free of charge for people in need. They rang up all their clients to find out what their milk and bread preferences were.

Until recently the group helped ran a community café, which was open to the whole community. They tried to keep costs as low as possible, whilst covering the cost of the food. They found that it was a good way to get to know people in the community, and they were able to step in and help anyone they came across who was facing a difficult situation. The group have had to close the café as it was extremely time-consuming and took them away from essential tasks, such as applying for funding, and so was limiting the sustainability of the group.

*"We have not applied for funding since last year because the café took up all of my time, I was there till 10 at night sometimes"*

Currently the group only consists of three members, one of whom works full time on the project. The group want to become a registered charity so they are able to access more stable sources of funding and hopefully employ a paid member of staff. Without this, they do not feel they will be able to keep up with growing demand. The group have not put their costs up since they first formed seven years ago, which is something they are very proud off. However, in order to make the group viable they may be forced to do this due to rising food costs.

*"You see a lot more people struggling to buy food, especially fruit and veg. I am even noticing it for myself. We can do it because we are buying in bulk, but I have seen a big change. A lot more people are demanding our services and they want the cooking classes to help them"*



*A volunteer serving up a hot meal*



*A volunteer with the meal bags*

#### iv. Hartlepool Baby Bank

Hartlepool Baby Bank was formed in February 2019 by three mums who regularly used to share baby items amongst their group of friends and realised there was a wider need. The Hartlepool Baby Bank offers provisions for babies and young children free of charge, most of which comes from donations. When the group first formed, they were open for a few hours a week and rented out a space in a local community centre. They now rent their own building and are open to the public three days a week, and to support agencies seven days a week. The group receive referrals from midwives, social services, housing associations, food banks and GPs, and people can also self-refer. The group help a range of people including those escaping domestic violence, young mums, and premature babies.



*Packages ready to be given out*

The group have seen a significant increase in demand since COVID. Before the pandemic, around six to twelve families attended each session, they now expect around 40 per session. There has also been a shift in the support people need. When they first formed, they mainly provided baby basics such as nappies, wipes, and simple clothing. They now have service users asking for items such as shoes and winter coats for older children. Parents are now increasingly asking for dressing gowns to help keep children warm as they cannot afford to turn the heating on.

*"In the beginning people were asking us for help with nappies, wipes, baby food, usually we did clothing just for the smaller babies to cut costs, so they would have some but it was just to get a bit extra. Now we are seeing do you have a winter coat, do you have shoes, my child can't take place in sports groups because we don't have trainers. We see children coming in with dressing gowns instead of a coat, and that's really hard. Demand of dressing gowns has increased because families aren't putting their heating on. So the last two years it's got very difficult"*

In order to keep up with growing demand the group have had to take on new volunteers, and the two main organisers have given up their part time jobs in order to run the Baby Bank full time. The group are hoping to find a larger venue in order to store all the donations needed.

*"Some days I don't know how we have [responded to growing need], we have taken on more volunteers, we all work more hours. In the beginning, my colleague and I both had jobs doing different things that we have given up to run the baby bank full time, it's the only way it can function and meet the needs. We could do less hours but then people would have to wait three weeks and that's not okay"*

A lot of the parents the group come into contact with are very socially isolated. To help tackle this, they are setting up a six-week craft course, where the parents can come along, meet new people, and hopefully build a support network.

The group currently have sufficient funding for the next two years but they are already looking at longer-term funding. They would like to have a more stable source of funding which would help with their planning and guarantee they can go on supporting people.

*"It brings me joy, it brings me despair, it's a roller coaster. The weeks are hard, the weeks are long. But then this week we have helped eight new families.... We hopefully bring these*



*people some dignity and support, and in return they give me a bit of humanity and that we can actually be a community. I love all of my baby bank family, they are all my mums, I go to medical appointments, I have bought their babies home from hospital which is amazing. They pick you up on a gloomy day"*

## v. Leighton Slade Helpers

Leighton Slade Helpers was formed in the early days of the first COVID-19 lockdown as an emergency response to the pandemic, due to concerns that elderly and sick people would be unable to access food. During the pandemic they delivered food to people in need and provided prescription pickups. They now have a permanent site on the local high street and run a food bank and community pantry. They have also set up a listening service, as they found many people were struggling with loneliness and isolation. The group can mobilise quickly to help tackle local issues: when a group of refugees recently arrived from Afghanistan, the group helped sort through all of the donations collected in the area and distributed them to the families, and when homeless people get re-housed in the area they will put out an appeal to collect items that they need.

When the group first set up the food bank they made a decision that anyone could access help, without needing a formal referral. They welfare call everyone who accesses the food bank and take time to get to know them, which allows them to understand the client's situation, and refer them on for extra support if needed.

*"We realised very early on that accessing a food bank can be quite a daunting experience, people are ashamed, there is a pride element. So to have to be referred it is quite hard for people to ask for help"*

Currently the group are handing out 120 food parcels a week, three times the amount they were handing out during the pandemic. The group are seeing a massive increase in demand due to the cost-of-living crisis, and they sometimes struggle to provide enough food for all of the people who need it. There has been an increase in people in work who are accessing their services because they are struggling to make ends meet. There is also rising unemployment in the local area, with jobs being hard to access because of the town's rural location, made more challenging by the increased cost of fuel.

*"We are currently providing food parcels in three times the amount than we did during lockdown, the cost-of-living crisis is a massive real deal. I don't care what the politicians say, they are not at the coal face receiving the calls. People in work are experiencing in work poverty and they can't afford to put petrol in their cars to get to work. I think rural communities are harder hit because if you are a young man living in Leighton Buzzard and you get a job in Luton but you don't drive and the job starts at 6am you have no way of getting there"*

The group have plans to partner with a local residents association who operate a community building. They plan to open another community pantry and food bank in this space. They also want to use the space to run cooking classes to teach people how to use the food they receive.

The group is entirely run by 75 active volunteers and is completely reliant on grant funding. They need a more stable source of funding to cover core costs like gas and electricity which grant funders won't cover.

*"Grant funders don't want to give you money for core costs, they want to give you money for a fabulous project which they can associate themselves with, which is understandable but the bread and butter of most groups is how do we operate each day and who covers those costs. We are relying on people's goodwill"*

The group feel there are less services available in rural areas so are keen to help any group or organisation that needs it. They often help the local army veteran's charity, providing food and sourcing items people need, such as mobile phones. They also provide volunteer opportunities for the veterans which can be helpful to their mental health. The group also run the community café at the mental health crisis drop-in centre.

## vi. Oasis Food Pantry

Oasis Food Pantry is based in Bath and is made up of two pantries, one run in partnership with a local church, and the other with a group of community organisations. They were set up with the aim of providing low-cost food on a weekly basis, with additional support offered on issues such as debt, employment and digital inclusion. They also offer advice on making homes more energy efficient, as well as services for children under five. They invite experts in to deliver these services, as a result of research that showed that co-location of services was the most effective way to deliver additional support, rather than providing all of the services directly.

The group originally formed in 2016 with the aim of tackling holiday hunger. They partnered with the charity Make Lunch and offered hot meals and activities in the school holidays. The ward where the group ran was in the 10% most deprived wards in the country, and 60% of children received free school meals. When COVID struck, they spoke to families about their biggest needs, and all were concerned about being able to afford food due to loss in income linked to COVID. They delivered food parcels for 19 weeks straight, and subsequently just in the school holidays. Originally, they only supported families who had attended the initial holiday hunger programme, until they were asked by the local housing association to support additional families. The group could see the need for food distribution was growing but the food parcel model was no longer sustainable, so, in September 2020, they opened the Food Pantries.

One of the pantries is located in the inner city. This pantry used to predominately serve vulnerable adults referred from social services, but they have started to support families, including those who have recently moved here from Ukraine. The outer city pantry mainly helps families, but they are beginning to help more single adults, often referred from food banks. The group have noticed a clear increase in need over recent months with people much more willing to ask for help. They now have around 200 members, with the food they provide reaching around 500 people a week. Each week around 40 people attend each pantry.

As well as receiving referrals, the group pick up safeguarding cases and refer people on for additional support, as well as help with the collecting of evidence. As well as providing practical support the group provide important social contact for many members.

*"We have got three adult safeguarding cases, and a whole heap of other stuff that no one sees. It is also so rewarding, I wish we weren't needed, but if we weren't needed from a practical point of view we would still be needed for other stuff. In lockdown people said it was their only social contact they had all week, that's a massive privilege for people to trust you with some of their story"*

Currently, members can pay £3 for 6-8 items, or £5 for 10-12 items of food. However, the group are going to have to change this model as supermarket donations have reduced due to tightened supply chains, meaning the group are having to buy in more food. They feel they will have adapt allocations to better reflect what they are spending, but they are resistant to put prices up, which would challenge service users' already very tight budgets. The groups are working with other local food groups to try and solve the supply problems.

The group is mainly grant funded, and they do not have any funding lined up after December 2023. The group would like another full-time paid member of staff to help support their work

but grant funders are reluctant to cover this cost. Currently they have 40 regular volunteers, and are going to do another volunteer push in autumn to help keep up with demand.

## vii. Our Food Club, Thanet

Our Food Club was originally set up as a holiday food hunger programme by a local community activist who saw parents were struggling to feed their children in the holidays. She wanted to come up with a more stable solution, so set up a community shop in the local primary school. The community group would buy surplus food from supermarkets and then sell it on to the "Our Kitchen" members at a heavily reduced cost. Later, the group managed to find grant funding and the council agreed to lease them two premises free of charge.

This allowed them to set up two permanent shops, one in Margate and one in Ramsgate, just before the first COVID-19 lockdown.

The shops open Monday to Friday every week. Our Kitchen is free to join and anyone can become a member. Currently they have 3000 members and about 250 people come every week. The group try and promote healthy eating so everyone can fill a bag with fruit and vegetables for £1, and then select any other items they would like which are all priced differently. The group often receive donations from the local baker and other restaurants and cafes, which they give out for free. They have a policy that they will only charge people for food which they pay for. They also receive donations from the local hygiene bank so they are able to give out free toiletries to people who need them.

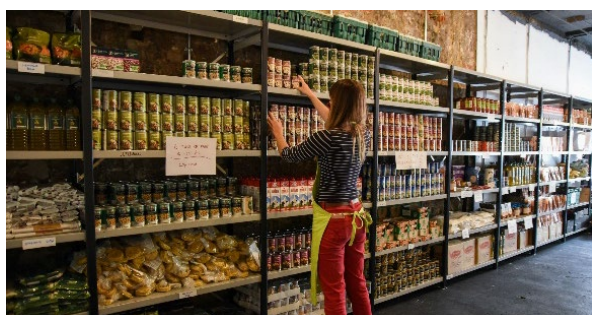
Margate has seen an increase in "posh" restaurants, shops and cafes in recent years. The organiser says she feels these shop owners support Our Kitchen and want to embrace everyone coming together and using the high street.

*"You see everyone here, I love that, it's a safe space"*

The group saw an increase in membership with the removal of the £20 Universal Credit uplift, and again in April when energy bills increased. They were expecting the same again in October 2022. They are seeing lots more people that are working and until recently were managing to meet their outgoings, but are now struggling to cope.

The group do more than just provide food. The Ramsgate Shop has sufficient space and equipment to run cooking lessons to help people learn how to prepare cheap, healthy food. They also run a coffee morning and community meals which helps tackle social isolation. They also run a book swap. All the staff and volunteers have received training from a local drug and alcohol service, so they can help spot people who may be struggling and signpost them to support services.

The group have enough funding to pay two shop managers who are supported by a team of around 20 volunteers. The group sometimes receives calls from local businesses with offers



of larger donations, and would like to have their own van to make picking up these donations easier.

*A volunteer stacking the shelves*



*The entrance to the Food Club*

### viii. Pudsey Community Group

Pudsey Community Group was established just before the first lockdown by a group of volunteers linked to the local church. They knew Pudsey did not have a group to support people in need during the pandemic. The community group began delivering food parcels six days a week, set up a befriending phone call service, and did jobs such as putting people's bins out and dog walking. They also set up a jigsaw swap service to help entertain people.

In summer of 2021, they wanted to move towards a more sustainable model as some families had become reliant on the food packages that had been set up as an emergency response. They now run an emergency response food bank which people can use for up to four weeks, and alongside this, they run a food pantry service where members pay £3.50 a week for £20-£30 worth of food. They have calculated that food pantry members can save £600-£800 on food bills a year. The pantry is set up like a shop and all the food is colour coded, so people can pick a set amount of each colour. Most of the food is provided by Fareshare and Rethink, who redistribute food that would otherwise go to landfill.

The group have seen needs change a great deal since they first formed. When the lockdowns came to an end, while the majority of people were trying to move back to normal life, others were still having to isolate due to their ongoing vulnerability. At the same time, people were losing their jobs because of the furlough scheme coming to an end. Most recently, people have started struggling more with the cost-of-living and are under pressure to meet even basic costs.

*"During 2020 everything was COVID, whether it was we are ill, we are isolating, I have lost my job, companies struggling to get furlough to work, unexpected bills, trying to keep a business open, all of that was COVID. 2021 was much more complex... There was much more of a mix of reasons, furlough ended so people were losing their jobs, people going back to business where they weren't able to pay as much as before. Then there were people still isolating, kids being sent home from school so people had to stay off work"*

The group feel that in the past, they had been able to help people by ensuring they were claiming all the benefits they were entitled to and by providing budgeting advice. But now people generally tend to be claiming everything they are eligible to, and already know how to budget, but there simply isn't enough money to cover their minimum outgoings. The group are having to hand out more "no cook food" for people that are unable to afford gas and electricity.

*"They are getting everything they are entitled to, we can't help them get anymore, they are learning how to budget, but they just don't have enough money, and that's widespread. The cost-of-living is going up, they can't afford petrol, they can't afford food, they can't afford heating"*

As well as the food distribution, the group provide wider support to the community including a children's clothes swap and a weekly lunch for the elderly. They also plan to set up a youth club.

The community group is funded through grants, donations and fundraising. The church used income generated from selling a small house to buy a building for the group to use free of charge.

The group currently have 40 volunteers, mainly recruited through Facebook. They would like to have more volunteers to do all the work they want to do. The group also have two paid members of staff who help coordinate the work.



## ix. Slung Low Theatre Company

The Slung Low Theatre Company is a community theatre group based in the UK's oldest working men's club, located in the centre of Holbeck, a large social housing estate in Leeds. When the group were forced to stop normal activities at the start of the COVID-19 lockdown, they wanted to ensure they continued to support their local community, especially elderly members of the community who relied on the club to socialise. They began by helping a local group who provide hot meals for the elderly and were then asked by the council to support the Leeds emergency food response, when an existing local food bank had to pull back support as a lot of their volunteers were elderly and had to isolate.

Slung Low decided from the start that the food bank would not be means tested and that anyone could access support. The first people they supported were linked to the existing food bank and hot meal service, but they quickly started receiving requests from other people in the local area. When they first opened, many people came forward offering their time, and at its peak the group had 30 regular volunteers delivering 300 food parcels a week.

In the summer of 2021, the council stopped providing funding to the food bank and the group could no longer feasibly run it. However, they did want to continue to support the local community, and tackle local issues. With help from three local people, Slung Low set up a community football club, which would help build community connections and improve people's physical health. Only one in ten people in the Holbeck area have access to leisure facilities, and the mortality rate linked to coronary heart disease, diabetes, obesity and COPD, is higher than the Leeds average. Unlike other clubs, the community football club is free of charge for people to play, they have male and female teams, and anyone is welcome to join. They also provide a free crèche for parents. Currently they have 35 female and 75 male members. The team is very multi-cultural and brings together people that might not normally mix. The football group received grant funding from the local council to cover the cost of the kits. The three coaches all volunteer their time for free.

*"There was a legacy that had to come out of it because we had grafted for over a year, we wanted to continue that community engagement. So we created with help from a couple of community members a local football team, it seems a strange link but a lot of the people we delivered to now play on the team, it was mental welfare switch so they could still feel part of the community and like they were being listened to but in a different way"*

The group still receive calls from people asking for help with food, and they have good links with other local support services they can refer people to. They have seen an increase in people asking for help recently.

There is a bar in the working men's club, which is now staffed by some of people that originally started volunteering with the food bank during the pandemic.

## x. Oxford Mutual Aid

The Oxford Mutual Aid group was formed in the first weeks of lockdown, by a group of community activists who knew people in Oxford would need additional support. Oxford already had a growing homelessness problem and, increasingly, working families were relying on food banks. The group quickly mobilised and started providing food across Oxford, as well as helping with odd jobs, prescription pick-ups, and housing advice. Since then, they have streamlined to just providing food support as this is where the biggest need is. They now send out 250 regular food parcels and 250 emergency food parcels each week. The regular food parcels are delivered to the same households each week on the same day. They pack the boxes according to the household's food preferences and ring the families each week to check how they are getting on. The group received advice from a nutritionist so they could ensure the boxes were nutritionally balanced. The emergency food parcels are delivered on the day of request six days a week. The group used to prepare emergency food parcels seven days a week and have 350 regular food parcels, but the volunteers were burning out keeping up with this rate of demand.



*A volunteer sorting food*

They made the decision early on that they wouldn't means test for support, and that people can self-refer through email or calling, but they do also receive referrals from organisations such as social services. Most of the people they support find out about them via word of mouth. They feel people are more comfortable asking for support from the group as opposed to formal support services. They have received feedback from local people that they find the presence of the group reassuring, even if they don't directly receive help themselves.

In the summer of 2020, the group decided to formalise and become a not-for-profit. This decision was made collectively as a group. They decided being a not-for-profit would allow them greater flexibility to adapt to changing needs, rather than being a charity or a CIC. They also felt that as a charity they would no longer be able to speak politically about local issues, which they wanted to continue to do. The group acknowledge that the people they are helping aren't always in a position to support the group themselves, but they want to start giving them more of a say in how the group is run. The group now has five directors. They were keen to ensure the directors were involved directly in the day-to-day operations of the group, so they all must volunteer a few hours a week. Two of the directors are paid members of staff, alongside three other full time, paid members of staff. The group decided to create these paid roles as the organisation became more complicated to organise and needed permanent oversight to ensure it ran smoothly. Previously, it took up so much of the key organisers time that they were unable to work alongside running the group, and were having to use up their savings.

The group has 200 regular volunteers who come from all walks of life, including students from the University of Oxford. Volunteers dedicate different amounts of time; they like to keep this arrangement flexible so it can work with anyone's routine.

The group have seen needs change since they first formed. When the council withdrew their emergency food support, they saw a large increase in demand, which has stayed high ever

since. Recently they have seen a surge in requests for their regular food parcels and now have 500 people on the waiting list. The group are also seeing more people “maxing out” where there is less they can do to increase their incomes or budget better; they just do not have enough money to support themselves because of increased costs. The group would like to recruit more volunteers to help keep up with growing demand.

Oxford Mutual Aid receive around £11,000 in funding each month, made up of donations and grant funding. They were given a church hall to use free of charge during the pandemic and they now pay a low rent. Ford, the car manufacturer, donated a van for deliveries, and they group have also had a number of fridges donated. The group are hoping to find specific funding to pay for a head of finance and data management.

The group buy in food from Fareshare and receive donations from the public. They buy toiletries from a social enterprise called “We Care” who bulk buy toiletries and then sell them back to community groups at low cost.



*Food sorted and ready to be packed*



*A box of fruit and vegetables ready to be sent out*

## xi. Splott Community Volunteers, Cardiff

Splott Community Volunteers was founded by a married couple seven years ago. After running a stall at the local fete, they decided they wanted to do more to support the community. They knew people were struggling with food poverty across Cardiff, and they also wanted to do something that brought the community together. Every week they run a breakfast club, where people can come along and pay £3 for a hot breakfast, which they sit and eat together, and take home a big bag of food. After the breakfast, they run a wellbeing session for people who want to take part. At the session everyone discusses how their week has gone and anything they might be struggling with, followed by craft activities. The group also deliver food to people that are unable to come to the club. This set up allows them to get to know the people they are supporting and signpost them to extra help if needed. At the moment, they have around 75-80 people attending the sessions each week. As well as food provision, they run community events such as a Christmas Grotto. They also try to tackle local issues, for example in the pandemic they came together to clean up an underused car park that was covered in rubbish.

*"I think we are quite unique because people can sit down and have breakfast, it's not just take your items and go"*

The groups have seen need increase over recent months as the cost-of-living crisis has deepened. They are increasingly having to give people food that can be cooked in the microwave, as people are unable to use their ovens due to the cost of electricity.

During COVID, they had to stop the sit-down breakfast. They are working hard to rebuild people's connections after COVID and help people feel comfortable coming to in-person events.

*"We get a lot of new ones coming through, but we do get the regulars coming through. But yeah things are increasing, some people are still a bit iffy about this next stage of COVID so we don't force people to stay. The next stage is about getting people together again, they come to us and have a chat and we try and ease that a bit. That why we try and do other stuff as well to get people involved"*

The group receive some funding from Big Lottery Funding and the Council. They also fundraise by providing catering for local events and the local rugby team.

The group currently rents a space off the local rugby team. Ideally, they would like their own venue which would enable them to run more community events. They are also trying to recruit more volunteers to help with the work.

*"Its just amazing place to work for, I am only a volunteer but it's just a wonderful thing to be part of. I get a great enjoyment out of it"*

## xii. Thanet Hygiene Bank

Thanet Hygiene Bank was formed in late 2018. The founder used to give out toiletries to homeless people she saw locally, and realised there must be a wider need for what she was doing. Thanet has high levels of poverty, and often when people are struggling financially, hygiene items are one of the first things they stop buying. This can have a significant impact on people's lives; women and girls stop going to work and school when they are on their period; children are teased for smelling; and people avoid social activities. She got in touch with the Hygiene Bank, a national charity which supports local hygiene bank branches, asking how she could help, and they gave her guidance on setting up her own branch. All the branches are independently run, and the larger charity provides support and guidance if needed, as well as running a national database where people can find their local bank. When the Thanet Bank was set up, there were 30 hygiene banks across the country; there is now 400.

The founder runs collection drives for toiletries as well as fundraising to buy in items. She then sorts through all the products and redistributes them to local charities who give them to people in need. She now supports 20 different charities and organisations, including a food bank, a homeless charity, a supported living centre, and a mother and baby group.

*"I support around 20 different local charities and organisation, quite a few primary schools now have food banks attached, Sanctuary supported living, Port Light homeless charity, Forward Trust addiction service, Mama to Mama who create baby boxes for new mums"*

The founder runs the bank out of a garage, which means there isn't the space for more volunteers. Currently they do not have the funding to pay for larger premises. The bank is funded by donations from local businesses and collections at the founder's work. She has tried applying for grant funding but has not yet been successful. They also have a site on website "Common Good" where people can buy specific items the bank needs.

### xiii. Margate Food Bank

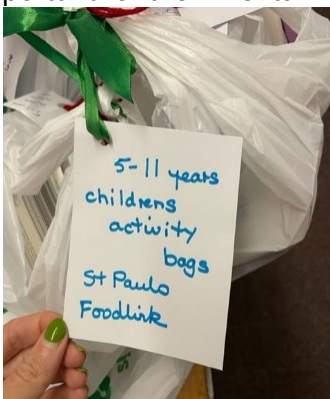
Margate Food Bank was founded in 2013 to address rising levels of food poverty in Margate. The original volunteers were all linked to a local church. They now run three food bank sessions a week across two different local churches and have 70 regular volunteers. As well as the church spaces, the Food Bank have a room that they use as a warehouse to store food. The group have five different “bags” on offer for different kinds of households; single adult; second adult bag; teenager bag; child bag; and homeless bag. The bags are prepacked, but they have a swap box where people can switch items they don't like. Most of the food is bought directly from a supermarket by money from donations and fundraising. The food bank also receives donations of food, but these have dropped in recent months. The group receives a weekly Fareshare delivery, but this varies in size so cannot be relied upon too much. They used to collect surplus food from local supermarkets but they found there was too much competition from other local food banks. Margate Food Bank receive donations from Thanet Hygiene Bank. Toiletries are in short supply, so they only give these out if people request them.

The group noticed an increase in demand during COVID and numbers have stayed high ever since. Before the pandemic they were giving out 200 food parcels a month, they now hand out 800 a month. Since the rise in the cost-of-living, they are seeing a sizable increase in pensioners asking for support who simply don't have enough money to live on, and with very limited ways of increasing their incomes. Before the pandemic, they were mainly an emergency food response, but they now have people who rely on them every week. The group have also seen an increase in people who live in houses needing the homeless bags, which require little or no cooking, as they can no longer afford their gas and electricity bills.

*“I've noticed that we are getting more and more people coming in that are pensioners and their pension doesn't cover their bills. Our service is designed to be an emergency service, its meant to be from when the emergency happens to when you can sort it out. Now it's not an emergency its long term, people on pensions that don't have a way to make more money, but they can't afford to live because of the increase in bills”*

The group have started applying for grant funding to cover certain projects. They recently received a grant for teenager bags from a local organisation that applies for funding from a variety of organisations on behalf on the food bank.

The food bank does more than just provide food. They have started giving out children's activities bags in the school holidays, with free activities for children to do. As well as handing out the food they give out tea and coffee, with a space for people to sit and have a chat. They say for some people this is the only social contact they will have a week, and is important for their mental health.



*A children's activity bag*



*Bags of food ready to be handed out*

#### xiv. Tremorfa Pantry

Tremorfa Pantry was formed by a group of parents in 2019 who wanted to tackle food waste. They set up cupboard and a fridge in a community hall and redistributed food from Fareshare free of charge to anyone who needed it. From there, they started running community events such as coffee mornings and raffles.

The pantry is now based in a building which is rented from Cardiff Community Housing. The Housing Association secured funding from the Lottery for the Flourish Project which aimed to empower working families to do things for themselves, and through this funding they supported the pantry. As well as providing the building, Cardiff Community Housing have helped the group become constituted, put in place governance and policies, and have provided first aid and hygiene training. The group attribute a lot of their success to the support from the Housing Association.

Before COVID-19, the pantry was supporting around 30 families a week. When they were allowed to re-open during lockdown, they were helping 120 families a week, and this has recently increased to 150. They are increasingly seeing people who cannot afford to use their heating or oven. Anyone is allowed to attend the pantry, as many times as they want to or need to.

*“The need is ridiculous. We are not a food bank so it’s not a full week of shopping it’s a top up, you get cans, cupboard, fruit and Veg, then some fridge stuff. You get a lot of people that are put onto universal credit, and they have 5 weeks with no money, it’s crazy. We have got people saying they can’t afford to put the heating on or the oven so they need things they can cook in the microwave”*

To help people cope with the rising cost-of-living the group are planning a roadshow where they will visit different areas of Cardiff and give people information about where they can get free food, how to make cheap cleaning products, how to cook on a budget, and how to mend clothes and fix furniture. They say a lot of people are still very nervous post-COVID to leave their local area so it’s important they go to them.

The group have received their own Lottery funding and they also do a lot of fundraising. Recently they did a giant tombola to break the Guinness World Record, which raised £2000. They also received £5000 from Cardiff Council’s “Summer of Smiles” programme to run children’s activities in the summer holidays. They are hoping to secure funding from Big Lottery to pay for a Community Development Officer, which they hope will make the group more sustainable as they will be able to look for and bid for funding. It would also take the pressure of the main organisers of the group who have to balance running the group with caring for their families. The group wishes they could have a larger venue so they could store more food and run more regular activities. They are also concerned that companies may stop producing excess food because of their own rising costs and they will have to swap to bulk buying food rather than using Fareshare.

*“We want to do these summer projects but we have nowhere to store the stuff so we have to get it every week. We are looking at buying stuff in bulk because it would be cheaper but we just don’t have anywhere to store it. The way things are going we might not be able to afford Fareshare or the companies might stop producing excess food, so we will have to start using bulk buying”*

All the organisers and volunteers of the group also use the pantry. They want to promote the idea that there shouldn't be any shame associated with needing help, and they want to build back the community that was lost over COVID.

*"There's no shame, we all use it, we share recipes, ideas, all sorts. We are bringing back the community, because everything stopped over lockdown, and I think it's working"*



## xv. Uniform Bank, Kirklees

The Uniform Bank was set up 11 years ago after the founder watched a BBC documentary which featured a boy forced to wear his older sister's old school uniform as his family could not afford to buy new uniform. This led her to do some research and she found that most grant funding for school uniforms was cut under the austerity policies of 2010/11. She linked up with the local Children's Centre and began collecting and distributing uniforms via the centre. She now has 150 collection boxes across Kirklees, and runs collections in local schools. She sorts all the donations and redistributes them to children in need. 50% of the people she helps are referred through Children's Services and schools, and 50% self-refer.

*"I watched a TV documentary about 11 years ago called Poor Kids commissioned by the BBC to look at 5 different areas around the UK and how poverty was affecting them. One of the children was from Leicester and he had to wear his sisters school uniform to school, it just really struck me... I thought there must be something we can do there must be lots of school uniform we could use."*

The scale at which the group are helping people has increased dramatically. In the first year they helped 50 people, the year before COVID they helped 1500, and in 2021 they helped 3500 people. They are expecting this number to rise even further as the cost-of-living pressures bite. Some families have been supported since the beginning of the project and would struggle to cope without the help of the uniform bank.

*"You don't get 3000 people asking for help if it wasn't needed"*

As well as providing basic uniform the group now also provide items like coats, bags and shoes, which are often the most expensive items for families to buy. To keep up with demand the group have started doing pop-up collections in different local schools.

*"So we have just started doing some pop up shops. We were at a school fair yesterday and we took over all their logoed items, and then passed them onto families. So we are trying to find them where they are at so they don't have to come to us"*

The group receive grant funding from the council, as well as doing their own fundraising. They also work closely with charity Shoe Aid, who provide them with school shoes. The founder of the group sits on the Families and Children's Partnerships Board, a group of local organisations that come together to discuss how they can work collectively to best support local families.

The group would like a more stable source of funding which would allow them to buy a van and rent a bigger venue, as they currently have too many donations to fit in their space. Grant applications are time consuming and it is hard to balance this with the pressures of running the service.

The group currently has one main organiser, 25 regular volunteers, and one paid member of staff. She was originally a volunteer and managed all the main admin tasks. She was going to have to leave to take a paying role, but luckily the group managed to secure Lottery funding to cover her salary. She brings a lot of stability to the process and ensures the smooth running of the group.

## xvi. Hornsey Food Bank

Hornsey Food Bank, based in North London, was originally a mutual aid group formed in the first week of the COVID lockdown to help people who would struggle to access food. Through conversations with the people they were supporting, they realised there would be an on-going need for support, particularly once government and council food support was withdrawn. In response, they set up a school holiday food bank in the local school. When it came to the end of the school holidays, they realised people were still in desperate need of support so set up a permanent weekly food bank in a local church. The food bank doesn't ask for any proof of need or a referral. Customers are walked around the different food stations by a volunteer so they can select which food items they would like from each category. They have always been keen to give people choice, and the system allows the volunteers to chat and build a relationship with the customer.

*"The first week we had 5 people collecting for a total of 15, last week we had 200 collecting for 700 people. Its mind blowing"*

The first week they ran the food bank they had five people attend, collecting food for 15 people in total, they now have 200 people regularly attending, reaching 700 people, and this number is always increasing. They saw a large increase in demand when the £20 Universal Credit uplift was removed and again as energy costs have increased. Lots of other local food banks have been forced to close because they could no longer meet their own running costs and keep up with demand, which means more people are now reliant on Hornsey.

*"It's interesting a lot of people are coming because they are already on benefits and they are not enough, or they are working and the pay doesn't go far enough. There are people with health problems and mental health problems. People who can't look for work. It's a whole mix of people. When we were coming out the pandemic we had people who had just lost their jobs. There isn't a typical person"*

When the food bank first formed, they had no idea they would still be running now or be of this size. The food bank has four main coordinators, with 80 regular volunteers from all walks of life. They made the decision to set up an incorporated constitution with a formal management committee. The group have tried to recruit board members with certain skill sets that can help the group, including a lawyer, a fundraising expert, and someone with experience of food management. The group have considered becoming a charity to help access different streams of funding but they are worried this would put limits on their ability to campaign. They are part of an Independent Food Aid Network which lobbies government.

*"One thing that's very important to the ethos is that we want to campaign for a situation where there are no food banks. The fact people are having to use them is a political failure. I would never want to be able to not campaign"*

The food bank often refer people on for further support from local services, they also have a representative from an advice agency who attends the food bank every two weeks.

*"One thing that always strikes me is the set up is completely fantastic and everyone is here on a voluntary basis. The skills and background of the people is so varied and we also have people who come as guests and become volunteers. I am just staggered by the fact that we are supporting 700 people and no one is getting paid, that we have to exist otherwise people would fall through the gaps"*

## xvii. Secret Angels, Wolverhampton

Secret Angels is a community-based group wanting to support the local community and make a difference to people's everyday lives. It was set up by a Wolverhampton resident who felt there was a need for a group that catered to the needs of, and supported all of, Wolverhampton's diverse communities. They began by providing Ramadan food packages for families that wouldn't be able to afford food in this period. They fundraised via social media and were given a grant from Sage Housing. Later on, Asda also donated food. They wanted to ensure the food parcels met the needs of different communities, so they sat down with women from diverse communities to understand what products would be most useful. They distributed 40 packages reaching a total of 110 people in the first stage.



Volunteers sorting food

Following this, they were given free use of a room in a local community centre which allowed them to set up a permanent food bank, opening twice a week and delivering emergency food parcels to families in crisis situations. They do not require any referrals and offer help for as long as people need it. They work to refer people on to other services so they can change their situation in the long-term. The food bank now has 114 members on its books, with about 30 people attending each week. This has doubled from when they first started, and they are increasingly seeing people having to make difficult decisions between eating and heating. They have also seen a growth of working people needing support, and they were particularly struck by a nurse who came forward for help. People are more often asking for food that doesn't need to be cooked or refrigerated because they can't afford the energy costs.

*"We always ask what the main reasons are people need help, it is mainly lack of income, and then that 5 week Universal Credit wait is a big one. We get people that are working, and are having to decide between eating and heating. People are sacrificing their dinner so their children can eat. I just wish we could do more"*

Secret Angels also runs a digital inclusion scheme in partnership with the Council. The Council provide laptops, tablets and dongles for people who do not have internet access at home. Secret Angels organise sessions where people can come and collect the equipment and be taught how to use it. This support has transformed the lives of people who have been cut off from their family or unable to apply for jobs or benefits because they don't have access to the internet.

As well as running their own programmes, Secret Angels works hard to support other charities. They have run two Macmillan Coffee mornings, where they sell cakes and run activities for children, raising £6785. The coffee mornings not only raise money but bring different groups of the community together. Secret Angels also work with a Manchester based homeless charity that provides warm bags that include items like hats and gloves, which Secret Angels then distribute to different homeless shelters across



A poster advertising digital support services

Wolverhampton. They also take surplus food from the food bank to the shelters.

Secret Angels are in the process of setting up a Toiletries Bank and a Clothing Bank to help people who are struggling to afford these items. They are also planning to open the food banks more days a week to keep up with demand.



Pavitter Mainn, Macmillan engagement lead, and Alvina Ali of Secret Angels are getting ready for the fundraiser

### Coffee and cake to raise funds for charity

A charity is getting ready to host another fundraising coffee morning for cancer support.

Secret Angels is encouraging residents of Wolverhampton to attend and enjoy a hot drink, cake and chat at their coffee morning to help raise vital funds for Macmillan Cancer Support.

The event will run between 11am and 4pm on Friday at Park Village Education Centre and follows on from last year's event where £3,575

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ly through cake and food sales, stalls, lucky dip, raffles and competitions.

A Macmillan information stand will be available where information will be offered on health and wellbeing, healthy eating, money worries, how patients are supported through their cancer journey and how that

ship manager for West Midlands Macmillan Cancer Support, said: "We are thrilled that Secret Angels have chosen to take part in our coffee morning again this year.

"We are so lucky to have passionate supporters like them, willing to raise money to support people living with cancer.

There are not enough words to thank Alvina and her team for their commitment, enthusiasm, and cake baking.



A collection of food provisions

An article about Secret Angels in the local paper

### xviii. St Albans Food Bank, Wolverhampton

St Albans Food Bank in Wolverhampton was initially set up by a pub landlord who was forced to close his pub in the first lockdown. He started off distributing food he could no longer sell in the pub and then began collecting food and distributing government provided food packages. When he was able to reopen the pub, it was clear there was still a large need for food provision in the area, so he asked the local vicar if he would take over running the food bank.

Initially anyone could receive food as many times as they liked, however in March 2021, demand started rising steeply and they realised the model was no longer sustainable. They also wanted to work to address the root causes of why people were accessing support. They introduced restrictions including only being able to access four food parcels, unless the person's situation changed. They also teamed up with the council who provided a Benefits Support Officer who they could refer people to for support. However, they found that lots of people didn't want to talk to a council official on the phone, and the officer didn't have the resources to come to the food bank and see people face to face. Following this they decided everyone could have two food parcels, and if people wanted to continue accessing the food bank, they had to work with a trained advocacy volunteer who would help them to change their situation. However, this system didn't work as it put too much pressure on the advocates to gatekeep the food bank, and often people said they were engaging but didn't turn up to appointments. They are now looking at moving onto a referral system to ensure people are receiving more holistic support. The food bank currently supports around 12 families each week.

The group have seen needs change over the course of running the food bank. At first it mainly helped people who were shielding and were anxious about going into shops, but when they moved to the "four times rule" it shifted to younger families unable to afford food.

The group is supported by a larger food bank who provide them with food. They also have partnered with a local chef who cooks healthy meals with surplus food and sells them for an affordable price. If he has meals he is unable to sell, he will give them to the food bank, and the food bank will give him any food they won't be able to hand out. St Albans Food Bank also support the local women's refuge, providing food parcels to any women who need them.

The group has managed to secure funding from local charitable trusts and generally has enough funding to do everything they need to. However, they currently use a room in the church that is meant for children's activities, so they are a limited on space. They would need to find new funding streams if they wanted to rent a larger venue.

*"You are walking a fine line but so far it's okay. The main problem is the room we are using is also for the children's activity in the church which was fine during covid but is now hard when we have to share the space. There is a tiny garden in the back so we are thinking we could put a container in there. That could cost money, so we haven't got the reserves for that yet"*

St Albans Food Bank are looking at becoming part of the Black Country Food Bank Network, which is similar to the Trussell Trust, and would mean they would receive more support and be part of a regional referrals system, where services like doctors and social services have vouchers they can give to people who need food support.

## xix. Merton Community Fridge



*A banner advertising the Fridge*

Merton Community Fridge was set up just before the pandemic to address food waste and food need in Merton. They are supported by the Hubbub Network who support groups to set up community fridges, by providing the fridges, the marketing material, and advice on how to run. Merton Community Fridge relies entirely on food that would otherwise be wasted and is open to everyone. They believe that focusing on the environmental aspects helps tackle the stigma of using the Community Fridge.

*"The community fridge is all about saving food from waste. So you don't have to qualify, anyone can come as often as they like. So that's helping to break down barriers, it's about helping the cause rather than being in a desperate situation. That said people really do rely on the service"*

They now run three sessions a week in a local church. There is a wide variety of food available including lots of fresh bread, fruit, and vegetables. About a quarter of the food comes from FareShare and the rest is picked up from local supermarkets. They have recently started running "Warm Wednesdays" alongside the community fridge, where people can receive a free hot meal cooked from the surplus food and spend time in the warmth. There is space for adults to relax and have a chat, and activities for children.

The group have recently changed how they manage the community fridge. Previously people would queue up and it operated on a first come, first served model. Some people who were anxious about food running out would queue up for hours, which meant people who had work or caring responsibilities were unable to queue and missed out. They now ask everyone to arrive at the same time and everyone is randomly allocated a number, they are then called up to collect the food in this order.

*"We have started warm Wednesdays, where people can come get a warm bowl of food and sit and enjoy a warm space. There is a really lovely atmosphere, we have activities for children"*

In February 2022, funding was made available for a part-time member of staff to coordinate and run the Community Fridge. A volunteer was recruited into this role and now works at the fridge full-time. This has allowed the group to collect more surplus food and open three days a week, helping more people. In February 2022, they were helping 120 people a month, which has since risen to 120 people each week.

*"Things have grown since I started working full-time, I have been able to put time into sourcing more food..in February we were seeing 120 people a month, last week we had 120 people. So demand must be growing but it's difficult to know how much this has been pushed by the increase in food or if this was good timing in that when I was able to get more food demand was increasing"*

The council have been very supportive of the Community Fridge; they provide free storage space in a council building and pay the group to run Merton's Food Poverty Action Plan, a network of organisations working to tackle food poverty in Merton. Most recently the council asked the group what they needed to keep up with growing demand due to the cost-of-living

crisis, and as a result, have agreed to pay the salary of a part time member of staff to help coordinate the volunteers. This will allow more time for the original staff member to source food. The group work to support other local food projects by giving them food they haven't been able to give away and advising them on where to source their own food.

Merton Community Fridge have a team of 50 volunteers from all walks of life, including teenagers, adults with learning difficulties, and people who use the fridge and want to give back. One of the volunteers said the fridge has given them a sense of purpose while they are unable to work and it has helped them rebuild their confidence. They see the Fridge as a safe space to come and feel supported by the other volunteers.



*A volunteer ready to hand out food*

## xx. Kids Bank, Chester

Kids Bank Chester was set up in 2019, after the founder watched a TV programme about children growing up in poverty and was shocked by the decisions mothers were having to make, and knew she had to do something to help. Kids Bank started life in a local church hall, and they now have a permanent base in a warehouse on an industrial site. Kids Bank provide clothes and equipment to children age 0-12 living in poverty. All provisions are delivered to the families. They collect donations and also buy in provisions using money from grant funding. They work hard to ensure everything they hand out is of the highest quality.

Kids Bank receive referrals from local agencies such as schools, midwives and social services. Families in need of clothes or toiletries can also self-refer. All referrals are submitted online on the Kids Bank website. However, after two self-referrals they require a referral from a professional organisation to ensure someone else knows about the family's situation, and ensure they are receiving other support. As well as receiving referrals, Kids Bank have a network of local organisations that they can signpost people on to for support, for example grief counselling.

Kids Bank have seen an increase in need since they first set up and they now help around 200 families each month. They have also increased the age range of children they help, from 0-6 to 0-12 as they saw how much this support was needed. They have seen an increase in families who are working needing help.

*"We are 100% busier than we were... We have had to increase our age range to help more families. We are seeing a lot more working families requesting help, and families who before used to be able to donate but can't donate. People who used to give to us freely are now having to sell things"*

Alongside more people needing help, families who previously used to donate are now selling items to make up for rising costs. They have also lost volunteers who have had to go back to work, as their partner's salary is no longer enough for them to survive on. Because of these challenges, they have had to reduce what they can give to families, and sometimes they don't have the items needed.

*"We had volunteers leave because they could no longer afford to volunteer. Our biggest problem is that there is just not enough donations, we have had to reduce what we give and sometimes we don't have anything at all of a certain item and that's really difficult. We have to keep an eye on our volunteers moral"*

Kids Bank help people in a roughly 15-mile radius of their base in Chester, however they are increasingly receiving referrals from further afield, in particular from Elsmere Port. They have decided to set up a branch in this area, so they can better serve this community.

Kids Bank have a team of 25 very dedicated volunteers. They all heard about the charity through word of mouth and approached the charity about volunteering. Kids Bank are very keen to ensure they only have people volunteer who fit with the ethos of the organisation. With each potential volunteer they have an initial discussion, followed up a by a trial shift to see if they are the right fit. There is then followed by a month's trial period before they become a permanent volunteer.

Kids Bank are predominantly grant funded, and they also receive donations from the general public and local businesses. They were lucky enough to secure a grant to pay for two paid



members of staff 20 hours a week, which has greatly improved the organisation of the charity and allowed them to reach more people in the community. They are looking for funds to pay for a part time fundraiser. Kids Bank would love to have more funding to pay for a full-time driver and use of a van, as at the moment, volunteers have to use their own cars which can be tricky when delivering bulkier items like cots. Despite needing more funding, Kids Bank are clear they only take funding for things they really need. For example they were offered money for their Christmas Project but they already had enough toys donated to run this, so they asked for the funding to be given to another local group.

*"We are not so naïve to think we are changing that world, but for the that child at that time we are changing their world because we are giving them what they need"*



*Volunteers sorting donations*

## 4. The Role of Anchor Organisations

### i. How are anchor organizations helping people during the cost-of-living crisis?

Anchor organisations are large organisations embedded in communities, such as schools, housing associations, and large charities. They play an important role in fostering communities, and are tied to a place due to their size, so have a significant stake in the financial, economic, and social wellbeing of the area. During the cost-of-living crisis, they have been increasingly relied upon to support struggling households.

#### **Schools**

Schools are often the organisations that have the most regular contact with families, placing them in a strong position to identify households who may be struggling, and to offer support. Research by the National Teachers Union found that 60% of teachers have seen a rise in children coming to school hungry, and 65% said children did not have the right equipment for lessons.

Support is being offered in a variety of ways: 58% of teachers have given food or clothing to students; 60% have made referrals to outside agencies such as food banks; 15% have given or lent money to students; and 24% have seen money being lent to families from colleagues or their school (Union, 2022). The Brambles Primary Academy in Middlesbrough started providing a free breakfast club to all families, as well as free after-school activities. One mother described this support as a “lifeline”. The King’s Academy Trust in Camden has recently decided to provide free school meals to all children, while at a primary school in Tyseley, Birmingham, the pastoral support team has been working with families to help ensure they have the financial support they are entitled to. They began by reaching out to all families on free school meals to let them know about the Household Support Fund, and then supported families with their applications to the Fund. Many of the families they helped did not previously know about the Fund or if they did, lacked the language skills or confidence to apply. Following this, the school reached out to all other parents with this offer of support (Jandu, 2022).

Despite many schools increasing support for families during the cost-of-living crisis, they are also increasingly struggling with their own funding. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that real terms spending per student will be 3% below 2021 levels in two years’ time. This is coupled with schools having to cope with rising energy and running costs (Staton, 2022). These impacts are already showing in problems with school budgets. A poll by the National Association of Head Teachers reported that 50% of school leaders who took part are looking at reducing the number of teachers or reducing hours, and 66% will be forced to make teaching assistants redundant or reduce their hours to deal with rising costs (Weale, 2022).

#### **Social Landlords**

About a third of households in the bottom 30% of incomes live in social housing, making the support offered by social landlords vitally important (CIH, 2022). As well as having to grapple with the rising cost of everyday bills, many social housing tenants have also seen a rent increase. In April 2022, most social landlords took the decision to increase rents by 4.1%, the maximum allowed by government. The Resident Voice Index, a survey of 5188 social housing tenants reported that 68% of respondents were worried about meeting monthly costs and only 15% felt they had the power to change their financial situation. Residents

reported that they were already on “shoestring budgets” with not much room for cuts such as forgoing a holiday (Resident Voice Index , 2022). Research by Ipsos found that those who rent were more likely to be concerned about meeting their housing costs; 59% of all renters worried about meeting housing costs, compared to 14% of outright homeowners, and 39% of people with mortgages (Marshall, 2022). The Resident Voice Index found that people viewed their social landlord as the second potential organisation to contact for support after Citizens Advice (Resident Voice Index , 2022).

Social Landlords are providing support in a variety of ways. Riverside Housing has dedicated an extra £2.5 million to the Riverside Foundation to support their tenancy sustainment work, offering crisis funding that can be given in small grants by housing managers to residents in immediate crisis, in addition to a new fund for community groups addressing local issues, and funding for strategic projects to address fuel and food poverty. Newydd Housing Association is working to help tenants make better use of the internet to help manage their finances. They have funding to provide sim cards and tablets for residents to use at home and are teaching residents valuable skills including using comparison sites to get the cheapest bills, and accessing Universal Credit services online. Flagship Group has launched an “Affordable for All” initiative to support tenants who raise affordability concerns. This will include free and confidential advice, a counselling service, small one-off grants for community groups, a relocation support fund to help tenants wanting to move to a more affordable home, fuel vouchers, and a discretionary fund for tenants in emergency need, for example to give out supermarket vouchers (CIH, 2022).

Housing associations are facing their own increasing costs. Research commissioned by the National Housing Federation found that the cost of building a new home rose on average by 12.3% from 2021 to 2022, and repair and maintenance costs have risen by 14% (Dent and Keck, 2022). Furthermore, social landlords are facing growing costs in responding to the building safety crisis and the urgent need to meet net-zero targets. This rise in costs limits their financial capacity, but many housing associations are offering valuable support despite difficulties in meeting their essential bills.

### **Charities**

Charities that have traditionally supported households across a variety of issues related to the cost-of-living are seeing demand rise and are struggling to meet the costs involved. Research by the Childhood Trust found that only 11% of charities supporting families in London had enough funding to meet demand, and 80% were already seeing a drop in public donations of money, food, and clothes due the financial pressures on supporters (McLain, 2022). These findings are further confirmed by research from the Charities Aid Foundation that found 71% of charity leaders are concerned about managing an increased demand. In September 2022, 6% of people reduced or stopped regular payments to the charity and there was a 9% drop in people choosing to make a one off donation compared to the previous month (CAF, 2022).

## ii. The research

Alongside the work being carried out by the community groups, larger “anchor organizations” have stepped up to provide extra support for people struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. We wanted to understand how they have seen needs change and any adaptations they have made to the support they offer. We spoke to six anchor organisations: three charities and three housing associations. We had also planned to speak to schools but due to the pressures on school resources and teachers’ time, we struggled to secure interviews. Below are six case studies of leading anchor organisations showing their contributions to community wellbeing during the cost-of-living crisis.

### *Bolton at Home*

Bolton at Home is an 18,000-home social landlord providing homes in and around Bolton. The majority of its stock was transferred from Bolton Council in 2010. As well as providing basic landlord services, the association go above and beyond to enhance all areas of their residents’ lives, offering support in food, finances, debt, employment, training, mental health, the environment etc. They prioritise keeping residents in their homes and will do whatever they can to support people to keep up their rent payments and avoid eviction. They do not limit their offer to their own tenants but will support anyone who needs it in the local area. They often receive referrals from other local housing associations for their services.

### Ucan Centres

The Ucan centres are dedicated buildings in local areas where Bolton at Home residents live. People can to their local Ucan centre go for help with anything they might need. There are currently six permanent Ucan centres and five pop up centres. They provide specialist support on housing issues, benefits, money advice, health and wellbeing. The Ucan centres work closely with the arrears team. If people are in arrears or difficulty, but show they are actively trying to improve their situation through engagement with housing services, they will not be evicted and will not receive final demand letters in the post.

**Training and activities:** The Ucan centres run training and activity programmes across a range of topics, such as first aid and hygiene to help residents CVs, and craft courses, for example “bling it up” where residents can create low-cost gifts for their friends and family, or ornaments for their own homes. These groups provide an important platform for residents to get to know each other, helping to reduce social isolation. All the courses are free to attend and take place within school hours so people can attend while their children are at school, and parents don’t need to worry about childcare. The Ucan Centres host weekly “Social Eating Sessions”, where elderly people come together for a free hot meal. For some, this is the only hot meal they eat all week. The courses and the meals provide an opportunity for wider conversations to identify additional help people need. The Ucan centres also provide phones, computers, and internet access for residents to use free of charge

**Peer Navigators:** The Ucan centres also employ “Peer Navigators”, local residents who are employed for 18 months to work in the centres, often following a period of long-term unemployment. They find this helps build trust with local residents, as these individuals are generally trusted members of the community. At the end of the 18 months, Peer Navigators are supported with applications for their next job, building on their interests and skills. 90% of Peer Navigators go straight into employment once engagement in the scheme ends, often in another part of Bolton at Home.

The Ucan centre staff have started to see demand increase as food and energy prices have risen, with people coming forward for support that previously would not have asked for help. They are very concerned about the impact of the October energy price increase and are working through ideas about how they can best support people.

### **Community Pantry**

In partnership with a local food charity, Urban Outreach, Bolton at Home runs a community food pantry four times a week. Each day the pantry is based in a different Ucan centre so they can reach people across Bolton at Home neighbourhoods. Members pay £2.50 a week and receive around £30 worth of food. They receive five pre-packed bags of produce, and can have a choice of up to nine extra items. All the bags are packed to ensure residents can cook full nutritious meals.

People can stay on the pantry scheme for up to 12 weeks and have to show they are engaging with other Bolton at Home services, such as the arrears team or money advice. Bolton at Home have this rule in place to ensure that people are working to change their situation and not to create an over-dependence on the pantry. If people are engaging with services successfully but still need the support of the pantry, they are allowed to receive the parcels for longer. They also have a dedicated hardship fund for people that are unable to cover the £2.50 charge.

Bolton at Home use “SoxBox” a data collection system to record information about everyone that uses the pantry. This includes family sizes, special requirements, and what services they are engaged in. This helps Bolton at Home capture the impact of what they do and better understand people’s needs.

### **Holiday Lunches**

Also in partnership with Urban Outreach, Bolton at Home provides free packed lunches to 2800 children a day in the school holidays. All the lunches are made in the Urban Outreach depot centre and then distributed through the Ucan centres. This scheme is supported by a number of local businesses and the Council.



### **Support for Community Groups**

Bolton at Home pays into the Bolton Fund, a centralised fund where local groups supporting their community can apply for grants. The fund is provided by a number of different local funders. The fund is managed by the local Charity and Voluntary Service (CVS) who also provide training on IT and grant writing.

### **Summary**

Bolton at Home also delivers other community services, particularly in relation to open spaces, community gardens, and community food growing. Overall the association has a strong commitment to tackling poverty and helping residents develop skills while at the same time receiving essential support. The Chief Executive at the time of this report<sup>3</sup> has said that housing associations cannot simply put a roof over people’s heads and leave

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<sup>3</sup> Bolton at Home’s Chief Executive has retired in the intervening period between the research for this report and its publication. It’s new Chief Executive has confirmed Bolton at Home’s ongoing commitment to supporting its residents and wider communities.

tenants to struggle with survival issues such as food and essential bills, they in fact need much wider support, the “Housing Plus” model of housing provision.

## *Food for Aldgate, Eastend Homes*

### **EastendHomes**

EastendHomes (EEH) is a 3,796 home social landlord working in Tower Hamlets, London. EEH have a clear commitment to a localised neighbourhood management approach, maintaining a staff presence on all of their estates and providing tenants with the opportunity to influence decisions through elected estate management boards. They are also heavily committed to the provision of community services.

### **Food for Aldgate**

Food for Aldgate was set up just before the first COVID-19 lockdown. EEH has a long history of food-based social events, but they wanted to organise something more permanent to address food poverty and food waste. Food for Aldgate provides a box of free food each week to its members, most of which comes from produce that would otherwise be thrown away. Following discussions with residents about what would be most useful to them, EEH agreed to pay for onions, potatoes, spinach, and coriander each week, as these are the key staples in Bangladeshi cooking, where many of the residents are originally from. The rest of the food comes from Fareshare and the Felix Project, which includes pre-cooked meals and fresh produce. Food for Aldgate runs a session every week outside on the edge of one EEH's main estates. They do not have any means-testing criteria and people can self-refer. They are currently helping 50 people a week. The initial recruitment was carried out by an active member of the community on each estate who recommended people who they thought might benefit from the support. It then grew via word of mouth. They mainly help EEH residents, but they also support other local people who are in need.

In the pandemic they were given use of unused shop space which meant they could collect more donations and help more people, about 70 each week. They also collected children's toys to distribute to families. Since the pandemic, and since the start of the cost-of-living crisis, they have seen a large drop off in donations, and Fareshare deliveries have decreased in size as their services are spread more thinly.

Increasingly, they are hearing of people being worried about paying their bills and being able to meet everyday costs. One lady said the £20 she saves on food every week allows her to pay for broadband, which was a lifeline during COVID when her children were working from home. The food is distributed outside Toynbee Hall, a centre which provides free debt and money advice. The volunteers are aware of this and refer people for support if anyone mentions they are struggling.

Food for Aldgate is led by a staff member and a team of 10 volunteers. The project has allowed EEH to make contact with residents that they previously had no contact with, and they now have a better understanding of which residents are most in need and the problems they are facing. The volunteers come from lots of different communities within EEH, and people have formed friendships with people they didn't previously know. The volunteering allows people to be involved with EEH who might not feel confident attending a more formal residents' association meeting. One volunteer is now applying for a grant to set up her own community project. Volunteering with Food for Aldgate has given her the confidence to do this.

EEH would love to help more people through the project, particularly in the light of increasing need from the cost-of-living crisis. In order to do this, they would need more donations and another member of staff to help coordinate food collection and the volunteers. They are

looking at moving over to a food pantry model where people would pay a small amount for the food. This would make the model more sustainable in the long-term, as there would be more funds available to buy in more food.

East End Homes actively supports community initiatives in all its estates and provides facilities and community open spaces wherever possible. It also has an agreement with a local resource centre to provide expert benefit and debt advice. In general, its overall mission is to work for, and with, local communities.





## *Living Well, Abri*

### **Abri**

Abri Housing Associations is one of the largest housing associations in the South East of England, with 35,000 properties. They were formed from a merger of Radian and Yarlinton housing associations in 2020.

### **Living Well**

The Living Well Scheme was set up in 2021 to help achieve two of Abri's aims: to help residents cope with the rising cost-of-living and to reduce the climate impact of the organisation. Following a survey of residents, they found many people felt powerless to do anything about climate change, and they knew people would increasingly be struggling with the cost-of-living. They wanted to share steps that residents could take in their own lives to reduce their environmental impact and save money. Abri employed Chef Tom Hunt who specialises in cheap and sustainable cooking to be the face of the project. They produced promotional materials and blogs which covered tips and recipes. These include how to make the most of leftovers, reducing meat intake, and the best ways of storing food to reduce waste.

Through the project they set up the "Good Grub Hubs", sessions run by Tom Hunt to teach people to cook and eat sustainably and cheaply. To run these sessions, they teamed up with existing local community groups within Abri neighbourhoods who already had good links with residents. Through the project, they connected with residents who were already taking steps to help people eat sustainably and cheaply, for example a lady who runs a community growing project where she distributes locally grown seasonal food to others who might not usually be able to afford it. She has also produced a cookbook to teach people how to cook creative meals with food they get from the foodbank. When producing materials for the project, they are cautious not to seem like they are telling people how they should live their lives, but rather providing guidance if people would like to follow it.

Feedback from residents so far has been very positive. The online material has been viewed by 4.1 million people, reaching far beyond Abri residents. In the future, the project hopes to focus on topics such as sustainable travel and energy saving within the home.

This project goes alongside Abri's wider environmental strategy, which also includes improving the energy efficiency of their homes through retrofit and helping residents save money on their bills.

## *Your Local Pantry*

Your Local Pantry was set up in 2013, and is supported by Stockport Homes to provide sustainable, low-cost food options to local residents. Members pay £2.50 each week to receive a large package of food, with members often saving around £1000 a year on their food bill. Your Local Pantry allows members to pick the food they want and need, unlike a more traditional food bank model. As well as providing low-cost food, the Pantry aims to tackle food waste and all the food is surplus food distributed from Fareshare. Anyone can access the support and they do not require any referrals. In 2017, after an article was published about the project in the Guardian, Child Poverty Action Group and Skylight got in touch and helped support the group to become a franchise. There are now 80 pantries across the UK reaching around 90,000 people.

People use the pantry for varying amounts of time. Some people have been members since it was set up and rely on the pantry for their food each week. Others use the pantry while they are in a crisis situation and stop once their situation improves. Often, the pantry supports people who have reached the limit of the food bank allowance from their local foodbank.

As well as providing food, Your Local Pantry offers additional support to service users, including financial and energy advice. All the volunteers are trained to know about support available locally, for example housing or money advice. The pantries also provide social opportunities such as coffee mornings and craft groups. They find the food is a good “hook” which allows them to encourage people to engage with wider services.

*“It also tackles social isolation we offer wrap around services, money advice, energy advice. So food is the hook, and then the wrap around service is our USP”*

Your Local Pantry has seen a significant increase in demand over the last year, which they attribute to the rising cost-of-living. The Stockport Pantry has grown from 15 members before COVID to over 40 members. They have recently accepted a lot more members and they have started running pop up shops in different neighbourhoods to keep up with growing demand. In order to provide enough food, they now work with local supermarkets collecting food that would otherwise be thrown away. Your Local Pantry is supporting foodbanks to move towards the pantry model as it is more sustainable; food can be purchased using the money the members pay so they are not as reliant on donations, which many food banks have seen a drop in over recent months.

Your Local Pantry has paid members of staff but the day to day running of the individual pantries is largely volunteer-led. The Volunteers come from all walks of life, but quite a few are people that previously used to, or still do, use the pantry.



### *The Trussell Trust Network*

The Trussell Trust Network is a national organisation working to support a network of 1300 foodbanks across the UK. The first food bank was set up in Salisbury in 1997 in a garden shed and provided three days' worth of food to people in crisis. From there, the model spread through church networks. Each food bank in the network is an independent charity. They are all signed up to the same agreement and franchise, and have the same vision "for a UK without the need for food banks". Each food bank works in different ways and is responsible for securing its own food and managing their own volunteers. The Network will then support them with issues such as governance queries and strategic direction. The Network also carries out research and campaigns to end food poverty.

The Trussell Trust views the member food banks as distinct to some independent food banks because of their role within a community. They have a clear focus on reducing the need for the foodbank to exist. For this reason, they only offer food parcels to people with referrals to ensure that a larger organisation is aware of a user's situation and that they are receiving support. An additional reason for referrals is to take the pressure off volunteers, who may otherwise have to make a judgement call about whether someone "deserves" a food parcel. This decision has already been made by a professional. Each foodbank will have a network of support agencies where service users can be referred for further support. The network also provides grant funding to help the food banks offer financial support or benefits advice themselves, or bring in professionals to work with users.

The Trussell Trust always works to improve people's situation. However, they are increasingly finding that for many people there is nothing more they can do to increase their incomes or reduce their outgoings. Alongside running the network, they are campaigning for an uplift of benefits, better local welfare schemes, and more community support.

The Trussell Trust have seen a notable increase in need over recent years. They distributed 2.1 million emergency food parcels from April 2021 to March 2022, an increase of 14% for the same period in 2019/20, and an 81% increase since 2016/17. They are increasingly seeing people with more complex needs, and they are supporting people that have never previously needed support. They have carried out research showing that recipients are often people who have exhausted every other form of help, such as asking friends and family.

Recently, many food banks have seen a drop off in donations, as more and more people are struggling with rising costs. This is coupled with increased running costs from energy price rises. The Network supports the individual groups in building up donations, developing relationships with local supermarkets, and managing financial donations, which increased over COVID as fewer people were visiting supermarket drop off points. The network also links food banks in more affluent areas that attract more donations with food banks in more deprived areas, so they can share donations.

### *Christians Against Poverty (CAP)*

Christians Against Poverty are a debt advice charity formed in 1996. Trained advisers based in local churches provide debt counselling and money management courses. Service users are then supported by volunteers in a “buddy scheme”. Debt counselling is done on a one-to-one basis, and money management courses are run in group sessions. People can self-refer to CAP and they also receive referrals from other organisations. There are now over 500 CAP centres across the UK.

CAP have seen an increase in demand since the COVID-19 pandemic, especially requests for their money management course from people who might not be in debt but are struggling to juggle all of their costs. Since the rise in the cost-of-living, they are increasingly receiving requests for help from people who have never struggled with money before, and are often in work. Centres are currently exploring how they can help and engage more people. One centre has linked up with a local Children’s Hub. They will first run money management courses with the staff at the Children’s Hub and will then run it for the parents. This was following feedback that parents would be more likely to engage with the course if it was run in the Children’s Hub and could be vetted by staff they trust. The course also helps staff who are grappling with rising costs in their own lives.

Debt advisers are reporting that it is increasingly difficult for people to complete the debt course and become debt free. Clients are more vulnerable than previously, and the debt cases are more complex, with lower incomings. People are being presented with extremely tight budgets that are often in deficit once all of their essential costs and debt repayments are accounted for.

As well as providing money advice, CAP Centres try and offer other support. CAP Centres work hard to have links with other local support groups such as food banks where they can refer people on for extra support. They also have an emergency fund to help people with one-off costs such as a boiler breaking, and they report that demand for this fund has increased.

CAP Centre managers often only work part-time hours. This can make it difficult to meet the needs of all the clients requiring help. Despite growing need, churches which provide financial backing to the centres have also seen their running costs rise, and so have less money available to support the CAP centres.

CAP have recently partnered with the ChurchWorks Commission to set up the “Warm Welcome Campaign” which supports churches and other community organisations to open up their doors to provide warm, safe spaces for people who cannot afford to heat their homes due to the huge increase in energy costs. Warm Welcome will provide guidance, marketing materials, advice on managing volunteers, and online resources to anyone wanting to set up a warm space. They have also set up an interactive map where people can look up their nearest warm space. So far, 3000 organisations are registered to provide warm spaces.

### iii. Concluding Thoughts

Anchor organisations are working hard to provide services for the communities that they serve, despite facing challenges with their own rising costs and limited capacity. While six anchor organisations that we highlighted in this research have different focuses, and the services they deliver are varied, some key themes emerge from our research:

- All of the organisations observed a significant increase in demand, with more people requesting help, and presenting with more complex problems. People are asking for help who have never previously needed it, many of whom are in-work. Resources are being stretched, and there is feeling that organisations will not be able to help everyone who needs it.
- Housing associations are doing far more than simply providing housing. They are working in creative ways to ensure their most vulnerable residents are protected.
- Organisations such as the Trussell Trust Network and Your Local Pantry provide useful support for local community groups. They provide advice and guidance on issues that volunteers running the groups may not feel equipped to deal with, and they encourage shared learning and best practice between groups.
- Anchor organisations are having to think creatively and come up with new ways of providing services to help meet growing need from the cost-of-living crisis, for example setting up warm spaces or using resident representatives to work more effectively with the local community.
- People need both emergency support in the immediate term, and wraparound interventions to change their situation in the longer term. While the main focus of many of these projects is on a specific need, for example food distribution, they all aim to provide more holistic support to help change people's situation, or to signpost service users into other services.
- Despite all the organisation we have described being considered "anchor organisations" with paid staff leading on the work, many of them are heavily reliant on the work of volunteers to support the service. It is important to provide meaningful, valued opportunities to keep volunteers engaged, whilst not placing too much pressure on the volunteers to avoid burnout, especially as volunteers may also be struggling with the cost-of-living crisis themselves.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

We know from our research and our discussions with community groups and anchor organisations that the cost-of-living crisis is having a very real impact in communities. People are increasingly struggling to meet everyday costs, with many people coming forward for help that have never needed it before, and including rising numbers of people struggling with in-work poverty. As energy prices increase further, we move into colder weather, and the cost of food and other staples continue to rise, the situation is likely to get worse.

Community groups are playing a vital role in supporting people in crisis. Without these groups, many people would not have access to food, or basic necessities for their children. Community groups have a good awareness of the challenges local people are facing and can adapt quickly, offering new forms of support where needed. Anchor organisations are also providing much needed support. In order to make best use of resources and keep up with growing demand, these two types of organisations must work together, sharing resources and expertise. For example, a housing association may be able to provide a free venue and advice on how group management, while a community group may have a good knowledge of the type of services required in the local area. Working in partnership can be mutually beneficial, as well as creating a more holistic support for service users. Community groups can also help each other by sharing resources and advice. Forums where local support providers come together would help build these relationships and ensure local resources are being used in the most effective and efficient ways. Oversight organisations such as the Trussell Trust and Your Local Pantry can help play this role, offering advice to groups and sharing best practice.

All the community groups we interviewed for this research were receiving referrals from statutory organisations and often provided support these services were unable to. However, these groups are not centrally funded and should not become a stand in for statutory services, rather they should work as part of a network of service offers.

This vital work is predominantly being provided by volunteers and relies heavily on donations. This is even the case for the work of the anchor organisations. It is important that volunteers feel properly supported, valued, and are not overworked. Training to help volunteers cope with more difficult situations, and regular reflective sessions, may help avoid burnout.

Funding is a challenge for community groups, and this is likely to get worse as demand for the groups' services continues to grow as the cost-of-living crisis continues. Groups need stable, long-term sources of funding to help cover core costs such as bills, transport, and staffing. More stable funding would also act as a buffer against the drop in donations that many groups are starting to experience.

As well as the emergency support provided by many of the groups, it is important people are helped to change their situation and be lifted out of poverty, through money management, debt advice, or help with employment and training opportunities. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for organisations to 'maximise' people's incomes, with many people already claiming all the benefits they are eligible for, working, and having good budgeting skills. For many people, there is nothing more they can do to increase their incomes; they simply do not have enough money to cover essential costs.

Whilst the work of these community groups and anchor organisations is crucial, it is not enough on its own to solve the longer-term roots of the cost-of-living crisis. We need an overhaul of how wages, benefits, and the economy work to tackle the wider problems of poverty, low incomes, and rising costs.

## Annex 1: Findings from Housing Plus Academy Think Tank

### *“Plugging the Gaps: How can we support communities through the cost-of-living crisis?”*

On the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> October, the Housing Plus Academy, a partnership between LSE Housing and Communities and the National Communities Resource Centre, organised a knowledge-exchange Think Tank, attended by 26 participants from community groups and charities, and including social housing tenants and staff, to address the key challenges created by the rising cost-of-living. The Think Tank explored what support is on offer to communities struggling with the crisis, and how community groups, charities and social landlords can work together to help vulnerable groups survive and cope. These are the findings from the event.

#### 1. Support to People in Crisis

**People are in need of immediate emergency help.** Many people need assistance with basics such as food, clothes, and fuel vouchers. Often, this support is provided by local community groups using volunteers, but many social landlords also provide direct support. Due to rising energy costs, keeping warm is becoming an increasing problem, which has significant impacts on health, wellbeing, and people’s finances. Bolton at Home have started handing out “Warm Boxes” which include woolly socks and thick blankets so people can keep warm, even when they have to reduce their heating. This form of support helps the emergency need but does not address the root cause of the problem, which is poverty, nor does it provide a long-term solution.

**When offering support, it is important to talk to people about their needs and think carefully about how they can best be met.** For example, do they have special dietary requirements, are there any children in the household, or any disabilities that require specific support? This ensures that help is targeted, and effort is not wasted. Clarion have an emergency household support fund used to help families in serious need. To use this most effectively, staff ask people what they need, for example a housing manager may conclude that a tenant needs an oven, but a single person wanting to keep their bills down, may actually find a toaster and microwave more useful. Alternatively, providing monetary vouchers, rather than specific items, increases a person’s ability to choose and decide what is most suitable to their needs. Monetary vouchers can also be used for items that may be less obvious, such as internet access, which make it easier to access services, job applications, and can reduce isolation.

#### 2. Long Term Solutions: Addressing the root cause of the problem

**As well as providing emergency help, it is crucial people are offered longer-term support in order to change their situation.** Bolton at Home run a community pantry where people pay £2.50 for a week’s worth of food. In order to access this, they need to engage with other support services such as money management, debt advice, or job search support. After six weeks, each case is reviewed. People can continue to access the pantry until their situation changes, as long as they can prove they are working positively with the support services. This model is used in order to prevent over-reliance on the pantry system. Bolton at Home liaise directly with the support teams to ensure residents are being supported in the best



way possible. They find that food provision is a useful way to engage with residents and to uncover problems, and allows staff to work with people that would never normally come forward for support. The Trussell Trust network requires all service users to have a referral from another organisation to access their food banks. They do this, not to restrict food access, but to ensure the users are engaged with, and getting support from, an organisation which can help change their situation. Clarion Futures carried out a review of the residents they have supported through their money advice team. They found that smoking was a major long-term cost that many households struggle with, as well as having serious impacts on health. For residents who want to quit smoking, they have set up a counselling service, and provide electronic cigarettes as part of this process.

**In-work poverty, people with good money management skills, and people who have previously been 'managing' are increasingly struggling to meet basic costs because of the increase in prices.** Short term support will not change this situation in the longer term, especially as energy costs become more erratic due to the climate crisis. There was a strong consensus that we need a radical redistribution of wealth so that everyone has enough to meet their essential needs. This means fair wages, and a tax and benefit system that properly supports people at the bottom end of the income distribution.

### **3. Climate Change and the Cost-of-Living Crisis**

Alongside the cost-of-living crisis, we are simultaneously facing another serious challenge – climate change. We must act quickly in order to mitigate climate change. It is possible to tackle both climate change and the cost-of-living crisis at the same time. Retrofitting people's homes will not only reduce their environmental impact and energy use; it will reduce residents' energy bills, and improve health outcomes by giving people warmer, dryer homes. This is a long-term solution that requires significant investment, but early action will reduce future burdens on people's budgets and health.

It is important to think about the long-term impact of decisions being taken now. Some interesting examples were explored during the event, including Clarion's Fuel Poverty Strategy which had some radical ideas such as replacing concrete floors in new build homes, which make the homes difficult and expensive to heat, particularly if a family moves in that is unable to afford carpets. They also plan to reduce the size of new windows, as some people are unable to afford large curtains, which means that uncovered windows are cold and draughty. Cobalt Housing have taken a similar approach: the Asset Management Team now sits on the Cost-of-Living Strategy Group to ensure homes are fuel efficient and cheap to run. Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham has introduced a £2 bus fare to travel anywhere in the city, in order to offer a cheaper alternative to the car, and reduce the amount of emissions being produced through traffic.

### **4. The Role of Community Groups**

Community groups play a critical role in providing support. They are often able to set up quickly and adapt to local need. They are predominately volunteer-led and provide a range of support including food, clothing, and advice. Increasingly these community groups are being relied on to meet people's basic needs, and they report a big increase in demand for their help over the last few months.

As well as bringing huge benefits to community residents, being involved in a group brings benefits to volunteers. It can help people unable to work have a sense of purpose and allows

them to meet new people. Volunteering can also help people gain new skills and confidence. The groups at the Think Tank talked about people going on to full time employment after volunteering, following years of not working.

In order for the groups to be sustainable, it is important to avoid volunteer burnout. Volunteers need to feel valued and well supported, and able to take time off when they need. Kids Bank, a community group in Chester, organise for a local mental health worker to come in and run sessions with the volunteers in between shifts. They also offer one-to-one support for any volunteer who feels they need some extra help. Another group runs regular “Volunteer Get Togethers” with food and drink to check in with volunteers and thank them for their work. It is helpful to have an active volunteer recruitment programme, to keep up volunteer numbers and to ensure too much pressure is not placed on a small group of volunteers. Social media is a good way to attract younger volunteers.

## **5. Funding Community Groups**

Funding is a big challenge for community groups as they are heavily reliant on one-off grants and donations. This makes it hard to plan for the future as it’s difficult to predict how much money will be available. Applying for grants is time consuming and often volunteers don’t have the time or the grant-writing skills needed. Grant funding often doesn’t cover core costs such as rent, bills or running a van. Funders often want a “new and exciting project” which can be undermining when the group knows that they are doing something that works and when the support they provide meets a demonstrable, ongoing need.

In Bolton, all the key local funders, including Bolton at Home, came together to form the Bolton Fund so that there was one central place for groups to apply for funding, simplifying the process and saving groups a lot of time. The fund is managed by the local Charity and Voluntary Service (CVS) who also provide training on IT and grant writing.

## **6. How can anchor organisations such as social landlords and grassroots community groups work together?**

In order to support people most in need, social landlords and community groups must work together. Social landlords will often refer people to community groups for support, and it is important for community groups to have good links with landlords as people may present to them first for emergency support, but the landlord could help with wider issues and services.

Clarion, as a large national organisation, feel it’s not best placed to provide emergency support such as food provision, and that it is more effective for them to fund local groups, who have more direct knowledge of their local area, and to also avoid duplication. It is important not to give up responsibility for providing these services, but work closely with the local groups to ensure they are adequately supported.

Housing associations and councils can also help with core costs such rent and bills, often not covered by other grant funders. Manningham Housing Association turned one of their flats into a community hub which now houses three community groups rent free. This support has allowed groups to continue running despite rising costs. It has also had the knock-on effect of dealing with young people who were causing nuisance on the estate, as they have now engaged with one of the groups based in the flat.

Larger organisations can also help groups through providing skills and training. The Tremofora Pantry in Cardiff was supported by Cardiff Community Homes to become

constituted, which helped the group to secure funding, and they also provided health and safety and food handling training which helps the group to work safely.

Larger organisations need to have open discussions with community groups about how they can best be supported. Following a consultation with the community groups they support, Clarion Futures concluded that many groups needed money for core costs and support with capacity building. In response to this feedback, they changed the terms of their grants to cover these costs and now offer tailored wraparound support for groups. This support helps the groups become self-sufficient and apply for other, longer term sources of funding.

## **7. Supporting Staff Delivering Services**

In order to carry out their work to the best of their ability, staff must be properly trained and supported. Frontline housing staff are increasingly seeing situations that are distressing and difficult to deal with, which can take a toll on staff mental health. Having a trained mental health first aider in every team will help identify people who may be struggling and ensure people have someone they can turn to when they need to talk through issues they are having to address. Organisations need to encourage a culture where people feel comfortable talking about mental health, and not fear being labelled as “lazy” for having time off to deal with challenging problems. Staff need opportunities for one-to-one sessions after experiencing something traumatic. However, managers are often not trained to deal with these issues. Organisations need clear pathways and signposting processes for staff to access help. Regenda have started running lunch time talks across a range of topics such as mental health and money management, to help staff deal with difficult issues.

It is important to remember that staff are also increasingly struggling to meet basic costs and housing associations and other organisations must work to support them. As well as one-off payments for struggling staff, there are other creative ways to support employees; for example cycle to work schemes, car sharing schemes, and allowing people to work flexibly can help cut travel costs, having showers available at work, and importantly, paying people a fair, living wage.

### **Messages to Government and Key Actors**

**At the end of the Think Tank we asked participants to propose key changes government could make to tackle the rising cost-of-living. The main ideas are below:**

- Work to understand people’s basic needs, and ensure they are being met
- Ensure fair wages for everyone to end in work poverty
- Increase benefits in line with inflation
- Help to meet fuel costs by taxing the fuel company profits

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