

Making community-scale food systems more resilient: Reorienting consumption practices by supporting community-scale supply chain models

■ Summary

Food insecurity increased in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic due to affordability challenges with job loss and accessibility problems related to lockdowns and uneven food distribution. Community-scale organisations played a crucial role in providing fresh food during the crisis, but faced a number of technological, practical, and resource barriers that limited their effectiveness. Greater resilience and associated health and social benefits can be achieved by supporting these community-scale efforts through online and physical infrastructure as well as funding schemes that reflect the contribution these services make to the public good.

Applying the ‘public money for public goods’ principle and acknowledging public health as a public good, strategies for reorienting consumption practices toward more secure, resilient, and nutritious food by enhancing community-scale supply chains include:

- Improve **technological infrastructure** by developing a geographically categorised, online network of community-scale food providers and providing a web platform to connect local suppliers and buyers.
- Improve **physical infrastructure** by providing accessible venues for community-scale food sale and distribution, facilitating development of local food processing facilities, and increasing access to public lands for food growing.
- Provide **financial support** through nutrition-based subsidies for community-scale growers, insurance schemes for community-scale food providers, and long-term grants for organisations assisting in local nutrition efforts such as community food hubs.



Introduction

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 10 people in the UK struggled to get enough to eat. Emerging national food strategies for England, Scotland, and Wales aim to address this issue along with widespread health problems connected to poor diet. Improving community-scale food provision is a target of all three strategies as a means of increasing both food security and consumption of fresh produce, yet specific guidance is lacking on how to facilitate this growth.

The pandemic served as a stress test of current UK food systems, revealing vulnerabilities that doubled the number of people relying on emergency food parcels in addition to dramatically increasing demand for locally grown produce. To better understand how local SMEs and social enterprises attempted to address these needs, and to identify the factors contributing to their outcomes, three case studies were conducted representing distinct approaches to enhancing community-scale food supply chains.

Case studies

In addition to desk research, detailed interviews were conducted with managers of three community-scale food provision initiatives to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their programmes through changes in consumption practices. Qualitative information from interviews was analysed in the context of agricultural and supply chain data, UK food policy, and emerging reports regarding food security during the pandemic.

- **Farmers Market:** Outdoor farmers market hosting local vendors supplying produce, dairy, meat, and prepared foods
- **Salad Supplier:** Grower and distributor of salad greens supplying restaurants prior to the pandemic
- **Community Grower:** Urban food growing initiative utilising reclaimed derelict land and distributing to local food networks

Due to their small size and local ties, community-scale food providers were able to adjust their activities quickly in response to evolving pandemic guidelines and increased demand. This agility enhanced food security by making fresh, healthy foods more accessible; strengthened community ties through collaboration and volunteer service; and enhanced the local food economy by supporting new food micro businesses.

However, these initiatives encountered a number of barriers related to limited resources and infrastructure for community-scale supply chains. Three categories of needs emerged across the case studies and current literature: technological infrastructure, physical infrastructure, and financial support.

Lessons for resilience

Community-scale supply chains can result in healthier and more sustainable diets that align more closely with EAT-Lancet diet recommendations. These case studies help illustrate that in order to reorient consumption practices toward more secure, resilient, and nutritious food, greater investment in community-scale supply chains is required.

As public health is a public good, community-scale supply chains should be approached using the 'public money for public goods' principle contained in the UK Agricultural Bill. This holds that subsidy payments to farmers should be based on the provision of public benefits such as better air and water quality, improved access to the countryside, and reduced flooding. Improved access to nutritious foods and better community-wide health outcomes clearly qualify as measures in the public interest.

Implementing 'public money for public goods' payments for community-scale supply chain participants can create a source of long-term and secure funding for community growers, suppliers, distributors, and other organisations involved in local food provision services that result in improved environmental sustainability as well as positive public health outcomes. This policy approach can support a more diverse range of actors engaging in community-scale supply chains, generating more resilient consumption patterns that align with health, biodiversity, and zero-emission policy targets.



Farmers Market:

'Stay at home' messages threatened market survival, while practical considerations like access to lavatories posed significant challenges for vendors. Uncertainty regarding restrictions incentivised suppliers to focus sales on grocery stores, leaving the farmers market vulnerable to loss of its 'essential' status based on provision of meat and vegetables. There was a large influx of prepared foods as new home-based businesses sprang up, yet severe delays in food safety inspections caused concern among market managers. Once outdoor activities were permitted, market traffic increased to the point that many vendors sold out early in the day.

Salad Supplier: With restaurants closed, the organisation pivoted to supplying salad greens directly to households. This transition demanded a great deal of administrative time and effort to develop technological infrastructure for ordering, tracking, and payment. Innovative delivery solutions were established including volunteers cycling door-to-door, yet the reliance on volunteers leaves the organisation vulnerable as people return to work. Simultaneously, lockdown restrictions curtailed the social service aspect of the initiative employing individuals from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.





Community Grower: Lack of clear guidance regarding outdoor activities led to severe precautionary cutbacks in production. Eventually, creative solutions were found such as assigning gardening tools to specific individuals to address concerns regarding cross-contamination. The organisation benefited from a robust network of local food growing initiatives, including connections with a small-plant supplier that donated its inventory when commercial garden centres were shut down. However, increased demand from food banks coupled with lack of long-term funding opportunities strained the organisation and its staff.

Recommendations

To support community-scale food supply chains following the principle of ‘public money for public goods’, we provide recommendations for policy development and service provision designed to increase food security and resilience and improve public health.

Technological infrastructure

- Develop a geographically categorised **online network** of community-scale food providers to assist organisations in finding collaborators and mentors.
- Provide a **web platform** for consolidating local suppliers into a one-stop shop for online consumers; ensure sufficient standardisation across community-scale food provision platforms to support interconnectivity and collaboration.

Physical infrastructure

- Ensure **accessible venues for food sale and distribution** with public lavatories and facilities for food preparation.
- Facilitate development of community-scale **food processing facilities** such as mills and abattoirs.

- Increase **access to public lands for community-scale food growing** for both commercial and household use in both rural and urban areas.

Financial support

- **Subsidise food growing on the basis of nutritional benefits** and contributions to consumption within the local community.
- Provide tailored **insurance schemes for participants in community-scale supply chains** to ensure support is reliable if conditions constrain sales (e.g. bad weather closing markets).
- Provide **long-term grants for sustainability** to other organisations involved in community-scale supply chains, such as food hubs, to reduce administrative burden and uncertainty experienced by organisations relying on small, short-term grants.

Closing thoughts

Contributions of community-scale food providers

The contributions of farmers and other community-scale food providers are vital in ensuring a resilient and nutritious food supply. These stakeholders should be recognised for their role in promoting public health, environmental sustainability, and food security. There is a growing evidence base demonstrating how community-scale supply chains contribute to resilient food systems. This information is a vital tool for advocating for critical resources and support that remove barriers to their success.

Community-scale food providers are not just part of the marketplace – they are indispensable partners in ensuring public health.

Resources

Research projects

- [DiverseaFood](#)
- [T-Grains](#)
- [ResULTS](#)
- [Rurban Revolution](#)

Examples of successful community-scale food supply chain programmes:

- [Open Food Network](#)
- [Data Food Consortium](#)
- [Felin Ganol Watermill](#)
- [Black Pig Butchers](#)
- [Shared Assets](#)
- [Double Up Food Bucks](#)

Further reading

- Sustain (2020). [Response, resilience and recovery: London's food response to Covid-19.](#)
- Sustain (2021). [The right to food: What needs to happen at a local level?](#)
- Food Foundation (2020). [Covid-19 UK Veg box report.](#)
- Dimbleby, H. (2020). [National Food Strategy: An independent review.](#)
- Scottish Government (2014). [Recipe for success: Scotland's National food & drink policy, becoming a good food nation.](#)
- Fox, P. (2021). [The Food \(Wales\) Bill \(proposed\).](#)

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About the Programme

The Resilience of the UK Food System in a Global Context (GFS-FSR) is a £14.5 million, five-year research programme. It was launched in 2016 by the Global Food Security Programme (GFS), the UK's cross government programme on food security research.

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Across UK universities and institutes, 13 collaborative research projects are producing new evidence and recommendations for policy and practice. The results will help to identify and develop interventions to strengthen UK food security.

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