

Hungry for health

What citizens want from food



Contents

1	Executive Summary	4
2	Why did we do this research?	7
3	What did we do?	10
4	What did we find?	12
5	What next?	24
6	Annex: Participant Profiles	27
7	References	29

“If you give people who are food insecure great quality food, it’s really needed and appreciated. Affordability accounts for a lot more than just the price – it’s about people’s wellbeing too, about their need for good health, for dignity – and how food meets these needs.”

CHANTELLE NORTON
FOOD IN COMMUNITY



1. Executive Summary

“Food is a great leveller, isn't it? We've all got to eat ... three times a day if we can afford it, and if people can come together and share that, then straightaway you've got something in common.”

Producer

“I don't want to buy processed foods for them. I really don't. But it's the case of sometimes having to because they are cheaper. I'd love to cook a [roast] because they love a roast, but they don't get that very often...”

Recipient

“I think about meals, can it feed me for a couple of days? I like to buy the best quality I can and the simplest I can, and cook myself, add some herbs or some spices and make a really tasty dish from something simple. I get really hungry, I love to eat...”

Recipient

Who really benefits when food is cheap? Governments, global food businesses and supermarket advertising campaigns tell us we want cheap food. Politicians and policy makers make sympathetic noises about fair prices for food producers but argue that food must be affordable, especially for the 'poor'. But what does affordable mean to people, and how do those who are experiencing food insecurity make decisions about what to feed themselves and their family every day?

The UK has a food sector worth over £100 billion and our food costs less – as a proportion of income – than most of Europe's food, yet 4.7 million adults (according to a recent Food Foundation study) are worried about where their next meal will come from. These numbers suggest that there are important questions to be asked about who really benefits from the current system. In autumn 2021, FFCC set out to understand the stories behind these statistics and began work with a food charity that is trying to do something different. Totnes in Devon, where Food in Community is based, is an intriguing location for this charity's work. Often perceived as an affluent area, in fact Totnes is a community, like many across the UK, where wealth sits alongside poverty. It also demonstrates some of the best qualities of communities across the country – it's a market town with engaged and connected social networks. FFCC's research with Food in Community was an opportunity to hear directly from citizens who exemplify the very people 'cheap food' is supposed to help, in a community that is well placed to provide innovative new methods of support.

As we spoke to people in Devon, what became clear is that even those struggling the most to afford food feel that 'affordable' is about much more than price. We heard from people that they are doing what they can to get good quality and fresh food within their budgets, but the food that is most easily available is unhealthy. This needs to change.

Overall, the story that emerges from this research is that citizens already hold many of the practical (and radical) solutions that go beyond sound bites or advertising slogans.

Over the course of a few months, we talked to a range of people in different places in the food system – from those receiving emergency food to local food producers who are working with Food in Community to supply fresh produce directly to people most in need. In explaining the complex web of decisions people navigate in choosing food, the word ‘quality’ was often the first descriptor used – meaning different things to different people – but often signifying a combination of freshness, flavour, nutrition, value for money and method of production.

When we asked buyers and producers what they would do to make sure that they and their neighbours had enough healthy and high-quality food, the answers rarely focused on money or finances alone. Instead, they talked about means of accessing and producing food that prioritise community connection and fairness. This included a diversity of food projects and businesses built around community access, sharing of resources, and collective food buying and preparation. And they argued for more investment and priority given to smaller and more sustainable food production.

Overall, the story that emerges from this research is that citizens already hold many of the practical (and radical) solutions that go beyond sound bites or advertising slogans. Organisations like Food in Community are succeeding in providing those in need with what they actually need and want. The people we spoke to were clear that food that is good ‘value for money’ is good for people and good for the planet. This study adds to a growing body of work showing citizens’ strong desires for quality food, regardless of their financial situation, and for more community and social connection through food.¹⁻⁵ It shows that affordability is a dynamic interplay between cost, value and budgets. Furthermore, when asked, the people who are struggling to put food on the table are infuriated that their needs are used to justify and prop up a food system that is doing so much damage.

As tackling inequality becomes more and more of an issue, this research demonstrates how important it is to focus on the real economy that has material impacts on people’s lives. Improving the availability of good, healthy and sustainable food which improves health and wellbeing, and reduces harm to the environment, goes beyond the cost of food itself. It requires honest and transparent rebalancing of the cost of food, making the healthier and unsustainable options more expensive. It means alleviating the financial pressures on people’s budget from other sources - more affordable housing, energy and transport, fair wages and benefits, and investment in a transition to agroecology. Policies need to catch up with what citizens care about; ensuring people have enough finances to afford good value, healthy and high-quality food, and producers are rewarded for producing food in this way. This research demonstrates that communities have the interest, ideas, and the enthusiasm to act. What they need more of are the tailored resources and spaces to foster mutuality, and community action. Perhaps most importantly, it highlights the need to listen less to those who profit from keeping food cheap and start listening to the voices of those who truly understand the value of a good meal.

“Purchasing food that meets Eatwell Guide recommendations represents about 40% of disposable income for the poorest fifth of UK households, compared to just 7% of disposable income for the richest fifth.”

SOURCE: THE FOOD FOUNDATION,
THE BROKEN PLATE 2021 - THE STATE
OF THE NATION'S FOOD SYSTEM (2021)



2. Why did we do this research?

In the UK, one of the world's wealthiest countries, 4.7 million adults and 2.3 million children experienced food insecurity in 2020. This insecurity means they don't always have adequate nutrition and may be worried about where their next meal will come from, or are going without food on occasion.⁶ In the UK, household food insecurity is not caused by a lack of food in the system, but by the inability to access and afford that food, especially healthy food. One of the key barriers to healthy and sustainable eating is financial. Purchasing food that meets Eatwell Guide recommendations represents about 40% of disposable income for the poorest fifth of UK households, compared to just 7% of disposable income for the richest fifth.⁷

Much of the food available in UK supermarkets is categorically unhealthy, yet it is these unhealthy products that are often the cheapest.⁸ When people are struggling to put enough food on the table, because of a lack of financial resources, they are often reliant on these low-cost, yet unhealthy, foods. One school of thought argues that to increase access for everyone, food prices on healthier and more sustainable options should be lowered.⁹

However, a further cheapening of food or doubling down on emergency food aid is not a viable solution to enable everyone to eat healthy food (fresh, seasonal, sustainably grown and local), reduce our collective impact on the planet, and treat people with dignity.

Food in UK supermarkets is generally less expensive compared to other similar countries, but the true cost is picked up elsewhere in society – with many farmers struggling to make a living, low job security and wages in much of the food sector, a degraded natural environment, vast quantities of food waste, spiralling ill health and impoverished high streets. The mainstream food system is succeeding in providing food but is currently doing so at a very high cost to our health, climate, nature, livelihoods and communities. Driving the cost of food down will only exacerbate these pressures across society. FFCC calls for a transition in our farming system to agroecology to provide food that is good for people and planet, but such a food system must also enable access for those who are most vulnerable, including those who experience household food insecurity.

In the meantime, even low-cost foods can be financially inaccessible for those on a low-income, forcing households experiencing food insecurity to turn to emergency food aid organisations for support in accessing food. This will always be an inadequate 'sticking plaster' solution. Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic,

Communities are stuck in a system where surplus or waste food, often unhealthy options coming from UK supermarkets, is the least expensive way for them to meet the immediate food needs of their residents.

the use of food banks and other emergency food aid was increasing significantly across the UK, and many communities began providing emergency food during the pandemic. Though emergency food aid is helping people in need, its providers will be the first to tell you that it is not a long-term solution.

Communities are stuck in a system where surplus or waste food (often unhealthy options coming from UK supermarkets) is the least expensive way to meet the immediate food needs of residents. This approach does not solve the problem of household food insecurity or its underlying issues. It also does not treat people with the dignity they deserve or address the damage food waste has on the environment. The drivers of household food insecurity lie beyond the control of communities, ranging from housing costs and income levels to social benefits and farming subsidies. This can lead communities to feel trapped and unable to change things.

What does this mean for those communities and organisations providing emergency food? Where can they go next? Can they transition towards solutions which are responding to the root causes of household food insecurity while helping to build equitable, sustainable and agroecological food systems?

To answer these questions, we first need to examine the concept of food affordability itself. Food insecurity and the impact of cheap food on health and the environment makes affordability a complex concept to define. But understanding and discussing affordability is important for framing (or communicating about) policy solutions in the food system, as our previous research has shown.¹¹

With this research project, we wanted to explore the dimensions of food affordability and potential solutions to household food insecurity with citizens and producers, to help us start defining a new narrative about 'affordability'.



“I think it’s a brilliant arrangement.
I think what they do is amazing.
I’m very grateful for it, I’m not
embarrassed by accepting it.
I think it’s an amazing asset
to the community really.”

RECIPIENT 2



3. What did we do?

We worked with Food in Community, a community-based food programme in Totnes, Devon, to gather citizen and producer voices on food affordability and solutions to household food insecurity. Food in Community's team of volunteers collect surplus fresh fruit and vegetables, which are sustainably produced, and distribute them as food boxes to households who are struggling with household food insecurity, and to charities and community groups across South Devon. They also glean surplus food directly from farmers' fields, run cooking workshops and pay-what-you-feel cafés, and cater at community events.

The people we spoke to are receiving food from Food in Community, or have done in the past. We also spoke to volunteers and those supplying food (through gleaning or donations of surplus food). People are referred into Food in Community by local organisations, including Citizens Advice and the health service.

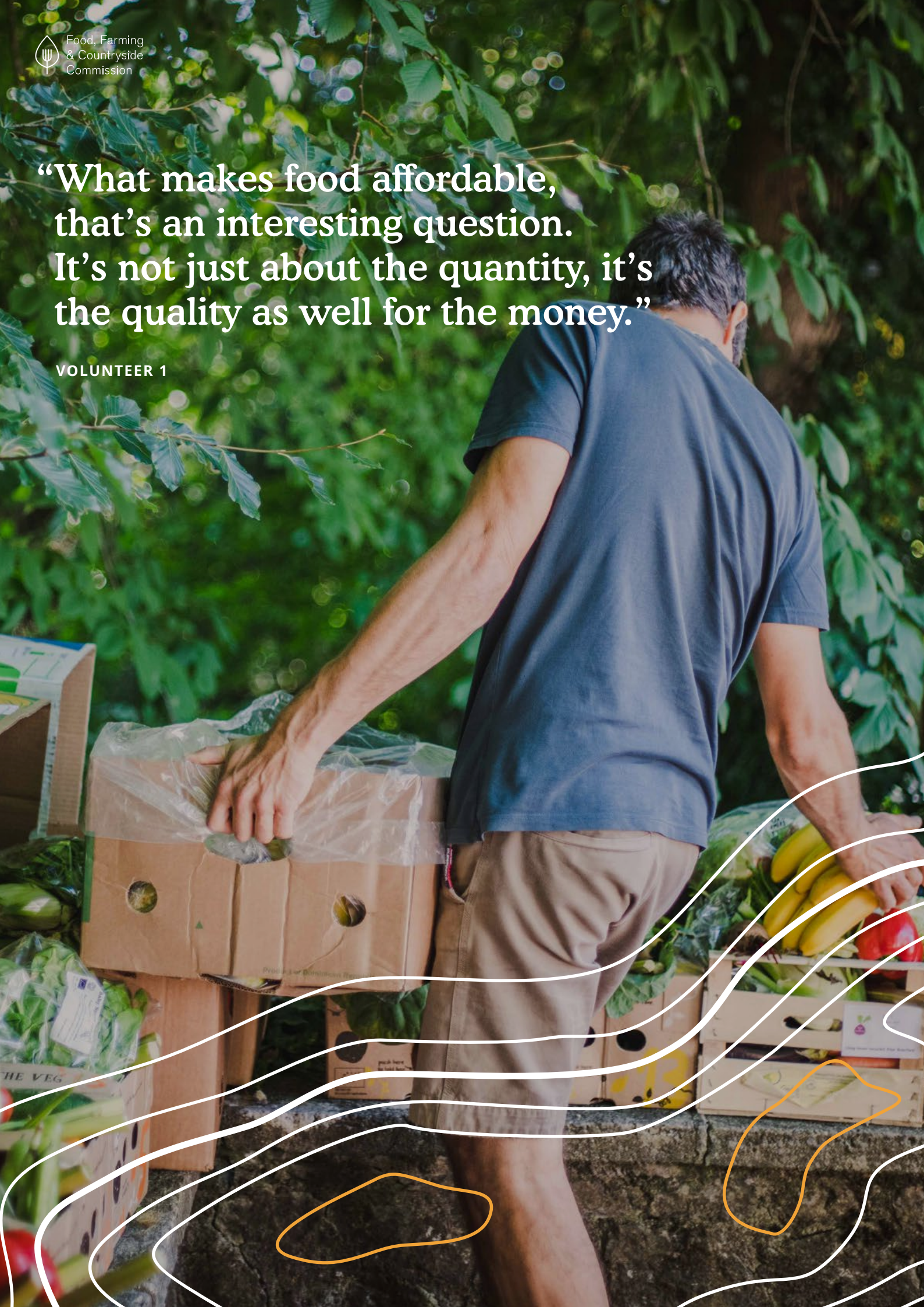
We worked with Food in Community, a community-based food programme in Totnes, Devon, to gather citizen and producer voices on food affordability and solutions to household food insecurity.

We spoke to 14 food recipients/volunteers and 5 producers over the course of three months, holding 30-60 minute-long interviews with each of them. The interviews were mostly conducted over the phone or online, but about a third were conducted in person enabling us to reach the most vulnerable participants. In one case, two of the participants preferred to be spoken to jointly rather than one to one.

Totnes has a reputation for being 'foodie' and prosperous. The food recipients we spoke to were facing a variety of challenges and situations, which meant their financial situations prevented them from consistently putting food on the table. The food system around Totnes is developed and well-linked with the community, but is only accessible to those who can afford it. Totnes is rural, which poses challenges to lower-income residents in terms of transportation and isolation, and faces a shortage of affordable housing (97% of people responding to a South Hams District local plan consultation said they were concerned about the cost of housing in the district).

“What makes food affordable,
that’s an interesting question.
It’s not just about the quantity, it’s
the quality as well for the money.”

VOLUNTEER 1



4. What did we find?

AFFORDABILITY IS ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN PRICE

The dictionary defines 'affordability' as: "the state of being cheap enough for people to be able to buy".¹¹ It is commonly understood to be just about 'cheapness'. But, as well as cost, affordability hinges on two other factors. The first is what food is purchased and the *qualities* that define its value. The second is the cost in relation to the *budget* available to that person, which will be subject to other pressures and demands.

When we asked people about solutions to challenges of food affordability, we thought we might hear that they want their food to be less expensive, but this only came up as one part of a multi-faceted solution in two interviews. For example, in the quotes below, the respondents spoke about the desire for cheaper food by contrasting the cost of food with supermarket profits and saying supermarkets should 'give more back'. We heard a few times that people wished higher-quality meat and dairy products, and organic fruit and vegetables, could fit into their budget – but generally not that products were less expensive.

Recipient 4: I think meat for instance, is priced as it should be and I completely understand it but when you're doing a weekly shop on a very small budget, can't necessarily always afford meat because it's very expensive, or you buy the ultra-cheap one and I don't particularly like to buy that because it tends to be from battery animals and things. So, I say I go for the normal one where it says, "Free range, bred by farmers," it can be so expensive, it can be 1/6 of what I've got to spend a week on shopping, so I would say meat really would be the one thing.

Interviewer: Are there any foods that you wish were more affordable?

Recipient 7: The decent meat really, so that I can get the protein into the children. I don't want to buy processed foods for them. I really don't. But it's the case of sometimes having to because they are cheaper. I'd love to cook a, you know, because they love a roast, but they don't get that very often, because the joints of meat are so expensive.

Recipient 9: So whoever's got the, like supermarkets and stuff, I think they should put a bit back in. They've got billions and billions haven't they?

Interviewer: So you think they should put a bit of the money they're earning back into the community?

Recipient 10: Yeah.

Recipient 9: Well, all that's going to happen then, if you think about it, if that was the case, as you say, a bit more money, if food was a bit cheaper, which would be really, really nice, but also on the back end of that, yeah, what that'll do for people and their self-esteem etc, do you know what I mean? Not everybody, but some people it will help in all sorts of different ways, and I suppose when you see that sort of stuff going on, if you're being given it, you're more likely to give as well.

A DESIRE FOR HIGH QUALITY FOOD

Affordability was about what foods or aspects of their diet they value or need (e.g., because of family preferences or health reasons), getting the best they can and how they can prioritise that within the limited budget they have. 'Quality' meant different things to different people; fresh, nutritious, organic, flavoursome, higher-welfare (e.g. free range eggs) and 'local' were some of the characteristics they mentioned.

Volunteer 1: What makes food affordable, that's an interesting question. It's not just about the quantity, it's the quality as well for the money. Also if it's locally produced. It shouldn't have had to travel so far. It's got to be within your budget, what you are prepared to pay for something. I'd rather eat less of, say, high quality meat for instance is one thing I don't eat much of anyway, but whatever it is I'd rather eat less of a good thing than too much of a processed food.

Recipient 2: As long as it's within your means and you're not having to use money that's allocated for something else, needed somewhere else. If it sits within your budget and a suitable quality then I've never felt like a great deal of onus has to be put on food other than it's affordable but it's fairly good quality as well.

Recipient 6: The amount of money that I would have available to me would speak to the "feeling" part. I'd actually feel that I can afford it would mean that I would be in an abundant place and not having to budget and count and consider. But wrapped up into that as well, like totally interwoven to that, is the quality of the food as well. If I had that amount of money, but actually that felt like that was really high grade and that was really great quality, and would be really beneficial for my body, my health, for my son, that's also wrapped up into the "feeling" part. So then I would afford it. I would try to afford it if it was important in that way.

Recipient 11: It's hard that one isn't it, because I don't know quite what makes it feel affordable. I suppose the quality of the food is important, the nutritional value that the food holds is important.

Recipient 13: We'll start off with how much money I've got in my pocket, can I actually afford it? Because there is limits on that, serious ones quite often. I think about meals, can it feed me for a couple of days? I like to buy the best quality I can and the simplest I can, and cook myself, add some herbs or somespices and make a really tasty dish from something simple. I get really hungry, I like to eat a lot! I would rather have a big box of vegetables than a packet pizza.

Likewise, producers were passionate about the quality of their produce, and proud of the methods used to produce it. They spoke of not wanting to compromise that quality by lowering labour and input costs, to make food 'cheaper'. They described not being able to compete with the 'industrialised' food producers on price but that many people living in their community can't afford their products.

Interviewer: And, do you think there's a way for a business like yours that you can run as a successful business and provide food at prices that people on low incomes could afford?

Producer 2: Well, I hope so otherwise we're all, yeah, I think that's, I've been thinking about it at the moment...it's difficult with our size of bakery because the labour costs are quite high and actually the flour costs are quite high compared to industrial bakeries. We're on a completely different scale of costs that we incur. But, the bread that we produce is the simplest, it only has flour, at its most basic it is just flour and salt and then manpower, labour power and electricity. I think there are ways, I don't, I think it's all about scale actually almost, I'm not sure, I'm thinking about it at the moment.

Producer 3: Unfortunately the way the whole system is set up, the cheapest food is generally the most unhealthy and the least sustainable - in terms of packaging and the way it's produced, and probably the labour conditions of the people who produce it as well. Whereas the stuff that we're producing is, in my opinion anyway, much healthier, but by producing it in a way that is more equitable both in terms of the environment and the labour force, it does cost more.

There are lots of hidden subsidies for the bigger-scale, unsustainable producers that makes their food more affordable.

THE FINANCIAL PRESSURES ON FOOD BUDGETS

Affordability relates to cost in relation to available budget. It is therefore not surprising that both citizens and producers mentioned important financial pressures on their budgets from non-food related sources.

They are doing everything they can to access what they feel is the best food for their family. A family that only has £30 per week to spend on food is swimming upstream in a food system that invests in and promotes 'cheap' food. Combined with low-income and/or benefits payments, high transport and housing costs, people are forced into compromising the quality of the food they eat – in many cases, food is the only moveable budget item they have.

The food recipients we spoke to described their precarious financial situations and the tactics they use to stretch their food budget further. They described wanting to buy healthier or higher-quality food, but not being able to, and needing to prioritise their budget to meet the needs of their families.

Recipient 3: I don't know, to be honest the whole ... It's a benefit system issue. I get £400 a month, my mortgage is £390 a month, and I'm like "is there any other support available?" "How am I supposed to buy food?" If I didn't have the support of my partner, and then actually it's not even my partner, it's my partner's dad who is giving us money from the pension to keep afloat at the moment. No one should be in that position.

Recipient 9: Like we can't go to [higher end supermarket] and all that sort of stuff, so we go to [discounter supermarket], and depending what's going on there, obviously we try and budget as best as we can. But with the veg stuff, especially from Food in the Community, we don't buy a lot of veg, so it's really handy to have that sort of stuff.

Volunteer 1: I think what will most help is to raise the minimum benefits so that everybody, like in Europe, has enough to live on. I think the benefits are far higher for people and there's a basic minimum income that they get, and that's enough to cover, they can eat and they're not going to starve. I don't know whether that's a myth, but this is what I've heard from other people who have lived in France and places, that the actual minimum once you're on it is a lot better. So I think also to raise the minimum wage as well. And housing prices. If people didn't have to pay as much on their rent they could afford to eat better food, or more food, or any food at all.

For the producers we spoke to, affordability was also understood and expressed as a tension between costs and quality. We spoke to mostly small, organic/ agroecological businesses, and heard in every interview about the impact of

high labour, fuel, and ingredient/input costs on their prices. Producers also find themselves swimming upstream against this 'cheap' food system, competing with food growers and businesses that are producing food in unsustainable ways and at scale, therefore saving on labour and other input costs.

Producer 1: We have faced some terrific price increases or rule things we've got to use, e.g. fuel is the biggest example how that's gone up and of course that has a knock-on effect for the plants we're buying in to grow. And staff is another one, we've got a big increase in staff waste this year and things like that. So, we've faced some hefty price increases in, what I'll call in our basic stuff we need really to grow the food this year so unfortunately we're going to have to try and increase prices just to cover all that really. So, yeah, we can grow it cheaper but our arm is always forced up our back by what market prices are for everything else, that's the trouble really, you know?

Producer 4: Food that's produced on a small scale that's kind of local or organic uses a lot of manual labour and not a lot of mechanisation, we've put a lot of labour into our food which is great, which is what we want to do, because that supports local people to come work for us, all that sort of thing, but that sort of small or relatively small amount of mechanisation, automation, all that sort of thing, means that it does cost more to produce. Therefore our food is more expensive than what we find in supermarkets. You can buy a salad bag in Tesco's for probably less than £1 but our salad bags are £2. We are not ashamed of that.

Producer 5: It's a complicated one, because we buy food at the true cost of it, so what we're paying to our organic growers reflects how much it cost to produce organic food - which doesn't have any of the tools available, so there's a much higher labour cost, much, much higher, that's their biggest cost. As it is for most farmers, but for organic it's next level because of all the weeding. We buy at a higher price than an average vegetable. What we sell it at, that's a business decision, and the way [our organisation] is structured and has grown over the years is franchise-based as well, so it's quite complicated in how we price things.

FOCUSED ON COMMUNITY, CONNECTION AND FOOD SYSTEM SOLUTIONS

When we spoke to food recipients about what solutions they would like to see, finances were mentioned – almost as a given – but it was not the focus of their answers. Citizens and producers want high quality food, in parallel to a stronger sense of community and social connection, and more diversity of food production and distribution mechanisms. This included describing a desire for more community growing projects, a more mutual and reciprocal system for obtaining food – such as community kitchens, cooperatives or collective purchasing with friends and neighbours – and more investment into smaller farms and food companies that are better connected with the community.

Recipient 9: So I suppose what I'm saying is, meeting all these different people ... they've helped me with structure and stability I suppose really as well, when I think about it. So I've been really, really blessed, really, really blessed ... To me that's been bigger than the food. I know it's different for different people, but that's been the most important thing.

Recipient 4: I'd like to see more community you know. Luckily where I live, I live in a place where it's quite high on community and I couldn't have got through this last year without the support of two of my neighbours, who have helped me in so many ways. So, I think for me it's how it used to be, it's community, about everybody pulling together and helping one another.

Recipient 12: Well, what would help me the most would be if I lived in a society where we lived in more communal systems and were connected to the land and went out and grew it ourselves ... I've been lucky enough to work in a couple of places where we've had gardens and market gardens as part of a project, and that communal growing, that kind of hands-on community of growers. So that's what I'd like to do. And then you get the additional benefits of that other community thing, that being outside doing the work. That's what would help me the most.

Recipient 1: It would just be really nice to have an area of land where one could go and just grow stuff. I mean I've had allotments in the past but when I was younger, and that's not quite what I mean. I mean more of a community thing...

Recipient 5: And also if they know it's going to waste, why have they got such a big project going on? It goes back to the industrial farmers with their mountains of grain and milk lakes and stuff like that. So maybe there is a way forward because there are small, not small but there are community gardens around where you can get fresh veg from. And most of those are voluntary projects, so maybe they can start donating to Food in Community.

Producers also spoke of a desire for more connection with the community and between producers for peer-learning and support. They highlighted their partnerships with the community as mutually beneficial and were keen to see local citizens more involved in food production, particularly around farm gleaning, community harvesting and sharing food. They also shared their desire for an increase in smaller, more diverse food producers and businesses, decentralised food production across the UK, and better support to smaller-scale enterprises from government.

Producer 1: The old system years ago on the farms and in the countryside it was that, I mean there was a lot more village folk we had then but village folk were always prepared to come up and help with the harvest and whatever and then in return they always, if they come and helped with the potato harvest, they would have a couple of bag of spuds to go home with or if they'd come and help pluck the turkeys at Christmas they would always have a turkey for Christmas. I'm not saying everyone needs to come out and work for me but there is always jobs here to be done if people are willing and there's no reason why they shouldn't in return have a good amount of fresh food to go away with in my eyes, you know.

Producer 2: I would decentralise food production across the country, all the logistics of moving food around so I'd break all that apart. [...] I'd increase food production locally, invest in that and start the idea of much grander scale local food production. Put a mill in every, how many mills could we have? You'd have a mill almost within every town at least, village.

Producer 3: Food is a great leveller isn't it? We've all got to eat, we all have to eat three times a day if we can afford it, and if people can come together and share that, then straight away you've got something in common. Then you find out about the single mother round the corner who needs some help with her garden, and if you've got a lawn mower you can lend it to her, then she might do something in return. All those little extra things that can come from it really benefit the community and make it more resilient. It's quite a difficult question, because I think there are so many different aspects of it, but fundamentally I think it's about having the money to be able to afford it, making the good stuff more affordable [inaudible 0:18:29.4] the bad stuff, and building community and confidence and the skills needed to use it and enjoy it.

COMMUNITY FOOD ORGANISATIONS HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY

We heard from citizens and producers about the positive role that Food in Community is playing in and around Totnes, and how it is helping to build a community food system, meet people's immediate food needs, and reduce waste in the food system.

The feedback about the Food in Community approach was glowing, and there was little stigma or embarrassment from recipients about the fact that they were being given surplus or waste food. This is important, as one of the main challenges that current food bank and other emergency food provision models face is stigma. The people we spoke to were grateful and appreciative for the *quality, freshness* and *variety* of the food they receive in the boxes, which may be one reason why we didn't hear about stigma/embarrassment: the food they are receiving is of high-quality, mostly organic and provided by producers in and around Totnes. It is fresh food, which distinguishes it from other emergency food aid provision available nearby.

Beyond this, however, the work of Food in Community is also helping to form a much shorter link between food producers and citizens, especially for people who are priced out of other 'short supply chain' models such as paid for veg boxes and community supported agriculture schemes.

Recipient 2: I think it's a brilliant arrangement. I think what they do is amazing. I'm very grateful for it, I'm not embarrassed by accepting it. I think it's an amazing asset to the community really.

Interviewer: So how does that bit of it feel to you, that it's effectively food waste in the system?

Recipient 9: I don't feel like that. Actually, because I know most of it comes from [F&V company], I used to work there, and it's really expensive there, yeah, so I don't look at it like that. They do the same at [F&V company]. If you work there during the day, you can go to the shed and get stuff. So no, I don't look at it as food waste at all.

Recipient 10: They did chuck tonnes of it out the back of the supermarkets and that, so I know people back home that used to climb into the skips to get it, all sandwiches in packets because it's out of date. It's still got a week's shelf life on it, or the shelf life's gone but it's another week before it goes off, that sort of thing. But we've not had one bit of bad stuff from Food in the Community, no rotten stuff or nothing. It's all clean and healthy. Yeah, so that's why we eat better now. Before we'd just buy junk.

Recipient 5: Before Food in Community if I ran out of money I'd go to the, what's it called? It used to be called the soup kitchen.

Interviewer: The food bank?

Recipient 5: Yeah, but it's humiliating...

...later in the same interview...

Interviewer: So the food that Food in Community provides is largely donated surplus food. It's largely organic as you said, which may have otherwise been composted or something. And it's good quality food as you said. But it is effectively food waste, how does that part of it feel to you?

Recipient 5: It's [surplus food] not the ultimate goal for me. It's good, it's really good that they're doing it and people have got the option. You have to eat that food pretty quickly, but like I say because some food is so expensive. I think the way forward really is for small land areas where people can develop their own food growing projects.

“Well, what would help me the most would be if I lived in a society where we lived in more communal systems and were connected to the land and went out and grew it ourselves.”

RECIPIENT 12



5. What next?

Affordability of food isn't only about low-cost but is a multidimensional concept that connects with people's relationship with food, how food fits into their everyday lives, and what foods they value as part of their diets. This varies from person-to-person, and from context-to-context, and for the people we spoke to, a single dimension of affordability as 'cheapness' is off the mark. This plays out in other research, where cost is only one factor that goes into food purchasing decisions and behaviours of low-income households.¹⁻⁴ Simply examining purchasing behaviour in order to assess people's values also oversimplifies what people actually want and excludes those who cannot afford what they value.^{12,13}

There is a clear demand for high quality food – food which people see as good value for money – and which is good for health and the environment. People and producers also want strong community food systems that would enable them to access it. It is important to note, however, that we spoke to people who are benefiting from or participating in a community food programme, and therefore might be more inclined than other community members to support a community-based food approach.

For FFCC, this research shows the need for change on two fronts:

1 **Building and using a different narrative around food affordability, one that centres on good quality food and improved financial situations for people.**

Our findings, in keeping with previous research and understanding of food insecurity, reaffirm that cheap food is not a solution to the challenges of food affordability. It is first about rebalancing the cost of food, making healthier and more sustainable options cheaper than unhealthy and unsustainable food. Then, it is about supporting and promoting the production and accessibility of high-quality food. And finally, it requires improved financial circumstances for citizens – with higher and more stable wages and benefits, more affordable housing and transport – more investment into small, agroecological food production systems, and a more level playing field between those and 'industrialised' food producers.

2 **Investing in community food systems to support a diversity of means for accessing high-quality food, including some ways which are outside of the traditional 'financial' food market.**

This requires building robust community food systems that enable citizens to access food and producers to provide food in different ways. This includes investing in land for community growing, community kitchens, more pooled/shared food activities, strengthening relationships between producers, local communities and organisations, and support to diversify and multiply small

and community-level food businesses. This links to previous work showing how food can be a social tool for community development.¹⁴

Community food organisations have a role to play, but not without the political and financial support supplied by governments, trusts and foundations, businesses, and other institutions working alongside them.

FFCC will continue to explore and promote these two avenues of change with these institutions in our upcoming work.



“I would decentralise food production across the country, all the logistics of moving food around ... I’d break all that apart.”

PRODUCER 2



6. Annex: Participant Profiles

- Recipient 1:** 60s, single, retired with grown children, has a long-term health condition, had to declare bankruptcy during Covid lockdown
- Recipient 2:** 60s, single with two grown children, previously self-employed but business collapsed in Covid lockdown, on universal credit
- Recipient 3:** 30s, living with partner, currently unemployed with long-term health condition, formerly employed part-time
- Recipient 4:** 30s, single with two children at home and one grown child, newly employed part-time in administrative work, previously off work with disability
- Recipient 5:** 40s, single, unemployed with long-term health condition
- Recipient 6:** 50s, single with one child at home, working part-time in a freelance role, business collapsed during Covid lockdown
- Recipient 7:** 40s, married with three children at home, unemployed with long-term health condition, as is their partner
- Recipient 8:** 70s, retired, married but partner in long-term care facility
- Recipient 9:** 50s, employed in health and care sector, ex-offender, living in shared accommodation
- Recipient 10:** 50s, unemployed, ex-offender, living in shared accommodation
- Recipient 11:** 50s, employed in education sector, single with three children at home and two grown children, on universal credit, with long-term health condition
- Recipient 12:** 50s, single, self-employed building business collapsed during covid lockdown
- Recipient 13:** 40s, single with one grown child, employed in education and hospitality sectors

- Producer 1:** Mixed farm producing organic vegetables, sheep, and cows
- Producer 2:** Bakery producing for wholesale and retail markets, co-owner in a local mill
- Producer 3:** Market gardener
- Producer 4:** Organic fruit and vegetable farm with online shop and vegetable box scheme
- Producer 5:** Organic vegetable box company

- Volunteer 1:** 60s, married, with two grown children, currently seeking work in health/social care



“It’s just brilliant, all the different goodness that we must be getting from this food. We’ve tried vegetables we’ve never heard of before, it’s brilliant.”

PRODUCER 2

RAINBOW
CHARD.
£2.50

SAVING
£1.50

WASHED MID
£2.50



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The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission focuses on food and farming, climate, nature and the public's health, for a just transition to a greener, fairer world. With partners in governments, businesses and communities, we generate radical ideas and practical actions to transform our countryside and our economy. We help convene collective leadership on the difficult questions and resource communities to become more resilient and adaptable for the challenges ahead.