

More than Food

Surplus Food
Distribution
during the
Covid-19
pandemic



FoodCloud

 The Community
Foundation for Ireland



Note

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of FoodCloud.

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Acronyms

CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CVOs	Community and Voluntary Organisations
FEAD	Fund of European Aid to the Most Deprived
GHG	Greenhouse gases
RFT	Request for Tender
RO	Research Objective
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SFD	Surplus Food Distribution
SFR	Surplus Food Redistribution

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Chapter 1: Introduction

FoodCloud

FoodCloud is a non-profit social enterprise that works to tackle the twin issues of food waste and food security. It does this by distributing surplus food from the food industry to a network of community and voluntary organisations [CVOs]. FoodCloud provides two services to distribute surplus food to a network of over 600 such groups across Ireland:

- a technology platform (Foodiverse) that connects over 500 supermarkets with surplus food to donate to CVOs
- three warehouse facilities in Dublin, Cork and Galway that distribute surplus from the food supply chain to CVOs

FoodCloud has progressed its technology platform for surplus food distribution. It has expanded its network: to the UK through its work with FareShare, to connect over 2,900 stores directly with over 7000 local charities across the country; and to the national food redistribution NGOs in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

In February 2022 KPMG produced a 'true value' economic and social impact assessment of FoodCloud's activities (KPMG 2022). This seeks to calculate the enterprise's earnings, economic impacts, social impacts and environmental impacts in monetary terms, where possible.

Highlights from the KPMG report are that:

- FoodCloud generates a range of economic, social and environmental impacts on society. These include: creating tax income and economic output; contributing to food security and community resilience by providing nutritious products; and assisting in reducing greenhouse emissions that would be created if the redistributed food was sent to landfill
- In 2021, FoodCloud distributed an equivalent of 42 million meals, with 10.4 million meals distributed in Ireland. Since its establishment in 2013, FoodCloud has redistributed the equivalent of 155 million meals to its network of CVOs across Ireland and internationally
- FoodCloud distributed approximately €13.1 million worth of food in Ireland in 2021
- The average amount of food distributed by FoodCloud in Ireland over the past four years is over 3,800 tonnes per annum: net of transport and warehousing energy use, this equates to €6.5 million worth of emissions avoided

- On average, food expenses for charities and community groups decreased by 39% through working with FoodCloud
- FoodCloud's 'true value' in 2021 was calculated at €25.2 million.

FEAD

Since 2017 FoodCloud has been procuring and administering the food element of the European Union FEAD (Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived) programme on behalf of the Department of Social Protection. FEAD supports activities that provide aid to the most deprived. It aims to help people take their first steps out of poverty and social exclusion by addressing their most basic needs: food and/or basic materials for personal use. The FEAD national food operation provides essential food support to those in most need, ensuring a reliable supply of food to the charitable sector over the life of the programme. In Ireland in 2020, 1,318 tonnes of FEAD product was collected from FoodCloud's warehouses by over 150 eligible charities across 25 counties (FEAD 2019; FoodCloud 2021).

Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic became a dominant aspect of everyday life in Ireland, and globally, from early 2020. The pandemic led to an acute rise in the demand for food from FoodCloud. The impact of the pandemic restrictions revealed many existing issues related to food security, but also created new challenges for individuals and groups. In response CVOs organised new food distribution programmes and adapted their existing food services to help to build and maintain community resilience.

During the peak of the pandemic in April and May 2020, FoodCloud more than doubled the amount of food distributed to over 60 tonnes per week. By the end of the year, it had distributed 77% more food than in 2019 to over 280 charities and community groups across Ireland (FoodCloud 2021)

The research project

In July 2021, FoodCloud invited proposals (RFT) for a research study on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on FoodCloud's operations, with a focus on the experiences of community and voluntary organisations [CVOs] that avail of its services.

Following a competitive tendering process, the contract to undertake the research was awarded to **Dr Michelle Share**, Principal Investigator [PI] (School of Education, Trinity College Dublin)

in collaboration with **Dr Perry Share**, Atlantic Technological University. **Dr Caitríona Delaney** joined the team as a researcher.

The research objectives outlined in the request for tender [RFT] were to:

1. Identify the types of community groups and charities that provided food during the Covid-19 pandemic
2. Describe how the provision of food during Covid-19 was different from food provision before the pandemic
3. Identify why did community groups and charities choose to provide food over other support
4. Show how CVOs connected and interacted with recipients during the pandemic
5. Describe service users' experience in accessing food, in terms of their needs, during Covid-19
6. Outline the challenges and opportunities experienced by CVOs in food provision during the Covid-19 pandemic

Structure of the report

Chapter 1 – this chapter, introduces the report

Chapter 2 – provides background and context for the research. It does not aim to be a comprehensive review of everything we know about food waste and surplus food distribution [SFD], but identifies some key issues of definition and debate and outlines some of the key challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic

Chapter 3 – outlines the methodology of the research

Chapter 4 – reports the findings in respect of the experience of community and voluntary organisations [CVOs]

Chapter 5 – reports the findings in respect of community members that were users of the SFD services

Chapter 6 – is a reflection on the findings in terms of the research objectives and key issues and presents some broader questions for consideration.

Chapter 2: Background and context

The generation of food waste in private households and the overall food system has become a prominent social issue. It has become a key global environmental challenge, as recognised by the United Nations. This is reflected at national level, for example within Ireland's Climate Action Plan, which commits to a reduction of food waste by 50% by 2030 (Dept of the Environment, Climate and Communications 2021, p. 184). Food waste has also been related to broader issues of food security and food poverty (Caplan 2017; Patel 2021).

One response to the challenge of food waste has been the development of processes for surplus food distribution [SFD], whereby edible food is diverted from the pathway towards 'food waste' to other uses: including being made available for use by community and voluntary organisations.

This chapter outlines some of the salient literature related to SFD. It defines some key terms, outlines some of the forms that SFD can take, indicates dominant rationales for SFD, notes some of the political debates around SFD and, finally, addresses the impact of Covid-19 on food and society and more specifically on SFD.

'Food waste' and 'surplus food'

The term 'food waste' might seem straightforward but it is a contested and complex one. For Spring et al (2020, p. 2), writing in the editorial introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Food Waste*, 'it is visual, categorical, statistical, visceral, multi-scalar, spiritual, relational, biological, technological, historical, and rethinkable'. It can encompass a plethora of activities, from the inefficient use of grain to feed livestock, to the leftover dishes at 'all-you-can-eat' buffets, to items ultimately cleared out of household fridges and thrown into the bin. Ultimately it refers to food, otherwise fit for human consumption, that does not get eaten by humans.

The EU-funded FUSIONS project attempted to devise an all-embracing definition of food waste. They identified it as:

The edible and inedible part of food discarded from the supply chain to be recovered or disposed (including crops ploughed in/not harvested, organic waste composted, treated by anaerobic digestion, co-generation, incineration, processed for bioenergy production, disposed to sewer, landfilled or discarded to sea).

(FUSIONS 2016)

This widely used definition refers to food materials that, while they may still be edible, do not enter the wholesale, retail or food service part of the food chain (such as cauliflowers that are 'too small' or mislabelled bags of flour). Much of this 'food waste' ends up in landfill, some is incinerated to recover energy, some ploughed back into the ground, while some is recycled to produce animal feed or compost.

By contrast, 'surplus food' can be thought of as food that has entered the food distribution system, but is not consumed as originally intended, perhaps because it has not been purchased, has exceeded a quality control ('best before') date, or has otherwise 'fallen out of' the designated food distribution chain. If it can be rerouted to an alternative endpoint where it will be consumed, it escapes being 'food waste' and becomes revalued as food for consumption. It also has the potential to shed the negative connotations that are attached to 'waste' (Midgley 2020, p. 358). Indeed, EU regulation stipulates that 'surplus food' is governed as food, in terms of quality, traceability and so on, rather than as a category of waste (Midgley 2020, p. 359). Surplus food may come from a variety of sources:

Supermarkets, wholesalers, foodservice industry, delis/restaurants, agricultural production or food manufacturers that has been rejected for sale to consumers due to mislabelling, being end of line or damaged pallets, or not meeting cosmetic standards such as imperfect size/shape. Surplus food can also result from food production trials that do not meet consumers' tastes, preferences and/or expectations.

(Caraher & Furey 2017, p. 4)

Whether food becomes defined as 'waste' or 'surplus' is a complex, socially-shaped process, or set of processes, that involves judgements about value: both 'economic value' as a commodity, and 'use value' as a consumable foodstuff or even as animal feed or compostable material. It is also about the 'moral and cultural ordering and contextual valuation of things' (Midgley 2020, pp. 356-357) – food can have ethical, moral, cultural and emotional values that cannot be reduced to the economic.

The generation of surplus food is an inevitable feature of the food chain in contemporary societies, as food demand can never be precisely matched with food supply (Cloke 2020). In Fig. 2.1, which reflects the food system of the United Kingdom, we can see that of an initial 108m tonnes of 'domestic' food supply, 15.2m ends up as 'food waste', almost half of which goes to landfill and the remainder to various other destinations, such as composting, incineration or fed to animals. Of the fifteen million tonnes of 'food waste', just 0.006m tonnes (6000 tonnes or 0.04%) is recorded as being 'redistributed' for consumption. This indicates the scale of the challenge, but perhaps also the potential and opportunity for action.

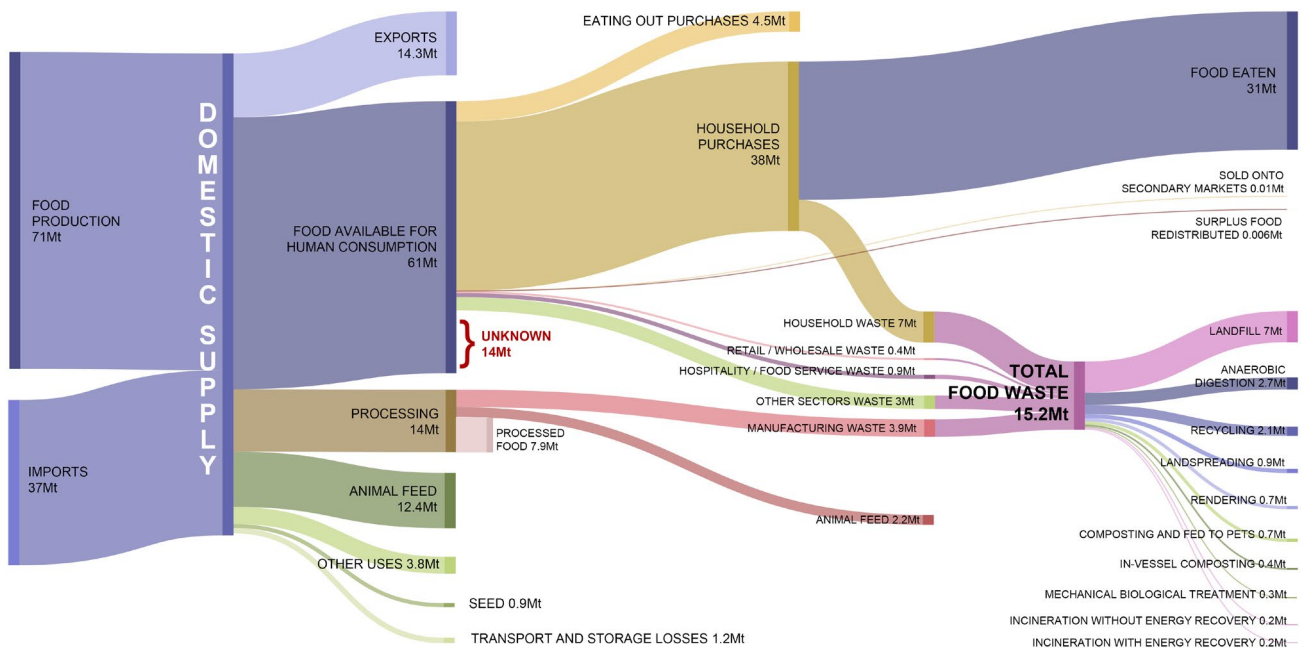


Figure 2.1 'UK food flow analysis' Source: Facchini et al (2018, p. 890). Reproduced with permission of authors.

Midgley (2020, p. 356) points out that:

While surplus food can be readily identified by industry donors, it is the combination of different aspects such as policy levers, the existence of a redistribution organisation and its capacity for (directly or remotely) managing the food that enables surplus food to be directed toward consumption rather than waste options.

Therefore, the processes of surplus food distribution [SFD], the agencies and individuals involved, and how it is governed, organised, practiced, justified and understood are all central to the fate of 'surplus food'. We explore some aspects of SFD in the next section.

Surplus food distribution

Surplus food distribution [SFD] (sometimes referred to in the literature as 'surplus food redistribution' [SFR]) can be defined as a 'process by which surplus food is recovered, collected and provided to people' (Damiani et al 2021, p. 3). SFD is how surplus food, that would otherwise have ended up as waste, is made available to people to eat. The distribution of surplus food, through both commercial and charitable contexts, has a long history (Murcott 2019, pp. 137-148; Williams & May 2022). Nevertheless, across the globe, there has been a significant growth in recent years in the number of organisations and individuals that take part in and arrange SFD.

This has been aided by the development of ‘a new era of ICT-mediated food sharing’ (Spring & Biddulph 2020, p. 2) with the development of app-based services including **Too Good to Go**, **Olio** and, of course, **FoodCloud**.

The distribution of surplus food inevitably involves *movement*. It often involves surplus food being collected from (or delivered by) large and small retailers, distributors and food service operators such as caterers, restaurants or hotels. This surplus food can be moved on as is or processed to varying degrees (for example by conversion into meals) and made available for collection or consumption on-site or delivered out to various recipients (Spring & Biddulph 2020, p. 5).

Once transferred, surplus food is used in many ways by foodbanks, meals-on-wheels services and other charitable and community-based organisations. Again, the food is moved from one location to another: it may be passed on to individuals or organisations to use as they wish or may be cooked and distributed as meals for people who need it. Surplus food can also be distributed to entities such as ‘social supermarkets’ (Holweg & Lienbacher 2010; Saxena & Tornaghi 2018) or ‘community pantries’ that sell at low or no cost to users (Caraher & Furey 2017, p. 9). In the US, Germany and some other countries, open access ‘community fridges’ or ‘freedges’ have been established to make surplus food available to anyone who wishes to take it (foodsharing.de; Aziz 2021).

Surplus food distribution is not a simple process: there are numerous practices involved, that include identification, sorting and redistribution (Midgley 2019). Davies et al (2017) have documented the diverse range of organisations and practices involved in SFD, across over 4000 relevant organisations, spanning 100 cities in six continents. Both ‘the material and temporal specificities of food’ (Spring & Biddulph 2020, p. 5) – such as physical bulk and weight, and perishability - need to be acknowledged regarding SFD. Weymes and Davies (2019) outline some of the techniques and tensions within the context of San Francisco, especially for technology based SFD initiatives: they show how the logistical challenges of moving surplus food around can be quite complex and difficult. The distribution of surplus food inevitably relies on ‘investment in spatial infrastructures as well as adequate labour’ (Spring & Biddulph 2020, p. 5).

Surplus food distribution takes place within a long-established set of institutions and discourses, such as the history of charitable organisations like the ‘Penny Dinners’ providers of Dublin and Cork, based on an English Victorian model of charitable giving (Corcoran 2012). Much of SFD is couched within a well established charity model (Kenny & Sage 2021), but other discourses such as food and environmental activism (Lougheed & Spring 2020) and community development (Talmage et al 2020) are also present. SFD can also be seen within the context of ‘corporate social responsibility’ – the set of socially-oriented and philanthropic practices engaged in by companies with a range of motivations: again, this has a long history – in Ireland, for example, through the activities of the Guinness company (Bielenberg 2003).

Of course, the continuation of SFD requires a consistent supply of surplus food. This is a central dilemma for those involved, especially for those with a vision to reduce or eliminate food waste.

As Kenny and Sage remark:

Ultimately, charitable redistribution is reliant upon a continuous over-production and excess supply of food from retailers, wholesalers, manufacturers, and processors in order to maintain the constant flow of 'surplus.'

(2021, p. 81)

Kenny and Sage also point, within an Irish context, to some of the 'unintended consequences' of SFD, especially when conducted via a charity foodbank. These include:

- a lack of choice and agency on the part of end users, making them appear as passive beneficiaries
- the food carries a moral imperative in that it 'should be eaten rather than thrown out' leading to efforts to redistribute food beyond immediate need or demand
- there is the potential for reduced support for local food businesses, as less food must be purchased on the market by organisations (Kenny & Sage 2021, p. 80)

To address these issues requires a conscious and critical approach to SFD, one that:

Consider(s) the longer-term unintended consequences of the values, ideas and practices embodied within charitable relationships, better comprehend(s) the diversity of food practices within low-income groups ... and recognise(s) that while poorer households are as likely as high income households to want to eat 'healthier' foods, the experience of poverty and their wider food environment inhibits their ability to do so.

(Kenny & Sage 2021, p. 73)

Surplus food distribution must be seen as something more than 'simply moving the food waste around' (Spring & Biddulph 2020, p. 12). Rather it a complex, historically and spatially situated and evolving field of practice.

Rationales for SFD

Diverse rationales or desires may underpin organisations' involvement in SFD:

- for surplus food to reach people who face food insecurity or poverty
[moral rationale]
- to offset food waste and its negative environmental consequences
[environmental rationale]

- to save money through diversion from landfill or to avoid other disposal costs
[economic rationale]
- to gain or build reputational advantage through CSR
[economic rationale]

These rationales are outlined briefly below.

Moral rationale

The fundamental moral position is that waste is, of itself, a bad thing. It is recognised that production of food, whether on a farm, in a factory, or a domestic household, is a set of practices that involves work, creativity, imagination, hard-won resources, attention and care. To jettison the outcome of this work is to devalue the human and natural input that goes into the creation of food (Yoreh & Scharper 2020). To devalue food in this way is to devalue the people who produce it.

There is also a strong moral imperative within all cultures to share food and to consume it collectively. This is termed *commensality* and is usually applied to households or other small social groups (Murcott 2019, p. 46-49). It finds a common expression in the idea of the 'family meal' but can also apply to eating in community settings (like schools or care centres) and may refer to the social aspects of food more generally. Food and eating are often, though not always, social practices.

Charitable responses to food insecurity and food poverty are often connected to the cultural and historical backgrounds of different countries. Many global religions favour the charitable approach of 'almsgiving' (Silvasti & Riches 2014, p. 288) or the distribution of food to people in need, or people generally (Yoreh & Scharper 2020). A strong moral argument that underpins SFD is that unnecessary food waste is unconscionable while there is a significant number of people who go hungry or suffer poor nutrition through lack of access to food.

Environmental rationale

As well as human input, food production is highly dependent on resources derived from the natural environment, including water, soils and energy. Chemicals are used in the production of fertilisers, insecticides and herbicides, while fossil fuels are used to manufacture feed and fertiliser and to transport food products. Food production, particularly of animal-based products such as meat and dairy, may lead to deforestation and land-clearing, which can have direct effects on climate; reduced biodiversity; increased pollution, excess energy usage and other environmental impacts. As the Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] notes (2021, p. 1): 'growing, processing, transporting food all use significant amounts of resources and when food is wasted, these resources are wasted too'.

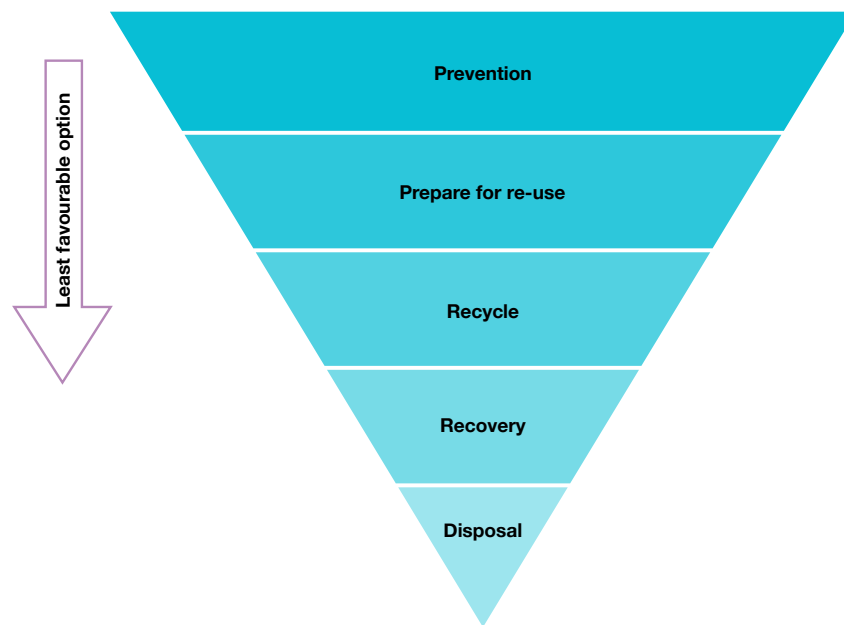


Figure 2.2 Food waste hierarchy [Papargyropoulou et al 2014, p. 108]

It is estimated that food waste contributes to 8-10% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (EPA 2021, p. 1). From an environmental perspective, SFD is mainly underpinned by the desire to reduce these emissions and to mitigate anthropogenic global warming. Within the 'waste management hierarchy' (Fig. 2.2). SFD, as a form of 're-use' is seen as superior to alternatives, such as incineration for energy or feeding to animals ('recovery'). Midgley (2020, p. 360) cautions that the location of food waste within this waste hierarchy 'contributes to the reproduction of existing food system practices and structural hierarchies'.

A key aim is to prevent or reduce the quantity of food waste going to landfill ('disposal' in the hierarchy), where it may emit GHG (especially methane) as it decomposes or to reduce the burden of additional food production.

Damiani et al (2021) have analysed in detail the operation of SFD in Italy, compared to alternative disposal or recovery processes such as composting or incineration. The measurement of environmental impacts is challenging, given the diversity of bodies involved in SFD. Yet, they conclude, even when taking into consideration the environmental impact of the processes involved in redistributing surplus food, such as transportation and electricity, SFD is still less environmentally impactful than if food is wasted (ie not retained for human consumption).

Economic rationale

There is a strong movement towards 'polluter pays' as expressed, for example, in the *EU Waste Framework Directive* (EU 2008, s. 26): 'the waste producer and the waste holder should manage the waste in a way that guarantees a high level of protection of the environment and human health'. The organisation that creates waste is responsible for the cost for disposal or other management. In the case of food that has entered the commercial food chain, this will include

costs for storage and securing of waste food, transport, and costs of landfill, incineration, recycling or some other process of dealing with the waste. There are also reputational costs of being seen to be wasteful. For all these reasons, SFD can be economically attractive for companies, as an alternative to other processes of waste food disposal.

Critics argue that SFD may not encourage the food industry to prevent or reduce the generation of excess food; rather it can be a way for them to 'manage their waste' through saving on disposal costs such as landfill charges. Tax incentives may encourage food donation rather than minimisation of surplus (Midgley 2020, p. 351). SFD may even involve transferring the costs of managing surplus food onto receiving organisations, especially if they in turn must dispose of unsuitable or deteriorated food materials. Such potentials can be addressed, as in Ireland, through voluntary codes of practice (Broderick & Gibson 2019).

Reputational advantage

Surplus Food Distribution can be described as a form of 'practical compassion, demonstrating community altruism by bringing together individual voluntarism with corporate social responsibility [CSR]' (Riches 2011, p. 771). Corporate social responsibility is now an important part of the marketing mix of businesses at all scales. It may involve community involvement through sponsorship of community activities such as sport or facilities such as public parks; it may be expressed through educational activities; or may be found in more explicitly political and change-making activities such as the Courtauld Commitment, a UK initiative amongst major food retailers to reduce food waste and Ireland's Food Waste Charter.¹² Food-related companies are amongst the most likely to publicise their CSR commitments (Pulker et al 2018).

CSR has often been described as 'greenwashing', self-serving or deceptive, distracting from any commitment to real change. Pulker et al (2018, p.3) note that despite its ubiquity amongst supermarkets and other food retailers, 'CSR activity rarely occur(s) at the expense of commercial priorities'. Nevertheless, global and national supermarkets and large food producers do have the capacity to positively influence the food system and, as we have seen, there are some corporations that have acted positively in the CSR arena in relation to food waste. Ultimately, firms' capacity to bring about genuine and lasting social change within a market-driven capitalist system is always going to be a challenge, not least in food waste reduction.

1 wrap.org.uk/taking-action/food-drink/initiatives/courtauld-commitment
2 stopfoodwaste.ie/resources/business/food-waste-charter/

Political approaches to SFD

Surplus food distribution is not only a technical matter but, like all social practices, involves value judgements, desired futures and political positions. As it inevitably involves a critique of the current food production system, it raises issue of power and interests, of regulation and conflict, and of social inequality. Those, involved in SFD can seek to depoliticise it, to encourage ‘buy-in’ from as many players as possible, while others overtly recognise the conflicting positions and orient themselves accordingly. Others place themselves, sometimes uneasily, between these two poles.

Midgley (2020) identifies these two approaches to SFD as the ‘brokerage’ and ‘challenger’ alternatives. The brokerage model focuses on the logistics of getting surplus food from willing providers to ‘needy’ recipients and is perceived as a ‘win-win’ response to the inevitability of food surplus generation. It has become increasingly institutionalised in government welfare policies and in corporate practices (Long et al 2020).

By contrast, the ‘challenger’ model of SFD is associated with a more radical politics, where ‘less conditional and more plural and collective means of accessing and sharing food are practised’ (Midgley 2020, p. 354). It directly questions the assumptions and relationships of the brokerage approach. It may include ‘unofficial’, socially sanctioned or even potentially illegal practices such as ‘freeganism’, ‘dumpster diving’ or streetbased food distribution. It may include activities that:

Directly question and rework the industry donation–charitable consumption nexus represented by the brokerage model. One means by which this is illustrated are actions that typically involve the communal sharing of surplus food in some way (whether this is sharing the consumption of a meal, or the sharing of facilities on a temporary basis to prepare and host a meal) that enables redistribution actions to constitute more diverse economic performances and relations.

(Midgley 2020, p. 354)

Nevertheless, as Barnard and Mourad (2020, pp. 392-395) indicate, the boundaries between actors within the two models can become blurred. They describe how the radical French (and later international) movement ‘DiscoSoupe’ developed an ‘official partnership with a major French retail chain’ (p. 395).

Many people make an overt connection between SFD and the issue of ‘food poverty’. It is recognised that in many advanced societies, significant numbers of people experience food poverty, though there are debates as to the meaning of this term, how to measure it, and how to combat it (Dowler & O’Connor, 2012; Long et al 2020). For some, SFD is a ‘win-win’ situation, where food that is likely to go to landfill is rerouted to those who need food. Oncini (2021, p.3)

points out that SFD can respond to two of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 2, 'Ending hunger and ensuring access by all people, the poor and the vulnerable to safe, nutritious and sufficient food) and SDG 12 'Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns' – which calls for a halving of food waste generation. SFD thus potentially can address food poverty as well as facilitating more sustainable consumption and production.

Others are more sceptical and see SFD as a means whereby food poverty is depoliticised; a 'solution' that does not address the fundamental issues of poverty and structural inequality (Caraher & Furey 2017; Dowler & O'Connor 2012; May et al 2019; Spring & Biddulph 2020, p. 7). Some organisations involved in 'food aid' have sought an end to the phenomenon of foodbanks and instead focus on 'cash-first' approaches that deal with the key determinant of food poverty: lack of income (Gordon et al 2022). Organisations that have become reliant on surplus food donations, and so incorporated into food system practice, may be less likely to publicly criticise donors (Midgley 2020, p. 353).

Often, those involved with food justice or the more all-embracing term of 'food sovereignty' (Long et al 2020; SAPEA 2020, p. 64) work towards surplus food being available for all. Food justice activities are then about more than valuing the surplus food; they 'may also work to create different social and economic arrangements' (Midgley 2020, p. 354). This can extend to injustices in food labour and production processes (Lang & Heasman 2004). Food activism may include organisations who work towards reducing food waste as part of a more sustainable food system (Marovelli 2019).

Surplus food distribution in practice

We have identified some definitional issues and some of the motivations that may underpin SFD. What do we know of the practices of SFD? In this section we briefly review some aspects of how SFD is done.³

There is a history of providing food to those in need dating back to at least the Victorian period, as we have already seen in terms of 'Penny Dinners' in Ireland. Focusing on the UK context, Williams and May (2022) note that many current food aid practices, such as food parcels, vouchers, corporate sponsors and 'food drives', have a long tradition, based on 'historically situated' struggles and strategies – some of which have been forgotten.

³ It should be noted that, apart from studies and accounts of FoodCloud itself, there is no published research on SFD in Ireland: this review is thus based on experience internationally, predominantly in the UK, US and Australasia.

In recent years, the arena of food aid has become larger, more institutionalised (Silvasti & Riches 2014, p.283) and professionalised (Fyfe 2005). This expansion is linked with issues of corporate interest and investment in the area:

Standardisation and the creation of digital platforms to enable expansion has created opportunities for corporate actors to exercise key control, so that while an organisation may retain autonomy and resist regulation, this may serve the interests of a corporate sponsor rather than of members or participants.

(Spring & Biddulph 2020, pp. 5-6)

Despite the active involvement of corporate actors such as supermarket chains, governments and large charities, there remains considerable diversity amongst community organisations involved in the provision of surplus food, in terms of services offered and availability of resources. This diversity reflects highly variable capacities to access volunteers, donations and facilities and may reflect existing spatial inequalities at local and regional level (May et al. 2020, p. 213). The following section briefly examines the phenomenon of foodbanks and other types of organisations, particularly at the community level, that are involved in SFD.

Foodbanks

Amongst the wide range of organisations involved and the many ways that SFD is used to provide food aid, foodbanks⁴ are considered both in academic and public debate as the most prevalent form of food provision to those who are food insecure (Lambie-Mumford & Loopstra 2020). Unsurprisingly, given the focus on foodbanks as a key element of food aid, diverse issues and concerns have arisen.

One issue, as noted by analysts (Hardcastle & Caraher 2021; Kenny & Sage 2021), is the lack of choice faced by many people who use foodbanks. Users of foodbanks, it is argued, 'access food as "receivers", rather than shoppers, and in a consumerist society this can be seen as a form of social exclusion' (Saxena & Tornaghi 2018, p. 4). This arguably affects people's sense of agency, likely has consequences on nutrition and cultural or dietary needs and may lead to subsequent food waste (Barker et al 2019; Roe et al 2020; Thompson et al 2018).

⁴ Academic discussion of foodbanks (in English), as reflected in this review, mainly derives from the UK, USA and Australasia. Midgley (2020, pp. 350-351) outlines the difference between 'food banks' as understood in the UK (which often depend on food donated by the public, rather than 'surplus food') and elsewhere. Overall, there is some diversity in relation to the term food bank (Rizvi et al 2021). It can refer, on the one hand, to organisations that assemble food from a variety of sources, that may include surplus, donated, state-supplied or even purchased food, and then distribute this food to a range of locally based organisations. This usage is common in the USA and Spain, for example. On the other hand, the term can be used to refer to a user-facing organisation that directly distributes food, for example for collection or by delivery, to individuals and families determined to require food aid. This usage is common in the UK and is that adopted in this review. 'Food pantry' is an alternative to the second usage and is used in a variety of countries. In Ireland, there is no standardised definition of 'food bank'. FoodCloud identifies itself as a foodbank, but so also do some individual operators at the local level: Crosscare, Simon and other CVOs have operated foodbanks at the local level. These may also be described as 'community food banks'. There are also integrated organisations that combine the assembly/distributive aspects and the public-facing aspects (see Rizvi et al 2021 in relation to Canada). An internationally agreed typology of foodbanks would be valuable but does not yet exist.

The staff and donors to foodbanks need to be informed or trained in the sourcing and distribution of appropriate foods to 'improve the capacity of a food bank to reduce food insecurity', while 'operational barriers' faced by people using foodbanks may include limited opening hours and access to the foodbank itself (Bazerghi et al 2016, p. 8). Users may struggle with having enough fuel in their car to get to a foodbank while others report relying on lifts from family or friends (Hardcastle & Caraher 2021, p. 5; Thompson et al 2018). Other notable barriers to using foodbanks include 'long queues, ineligibility for assistance, lack of information about available services and inadequate or unsuitable assistance' (Silvasti & Riches 2014, p. 294). They can be seen as overly bureaucratic and increasingly to mirror the welfare system, due to the processes used to show that users are eligible for food aid (Lindberg et al 2022; Thompson et al 2018). The stigma of using a foodbank can also be a barrier for some people (Bruckner et al 2021; Garthwaite, 2016; May et al 2019). Foodbanks may suffer from a lack of formal referral processes: many foodbank users find out about foodbanks via family and friend networks (Hardcastle & Caraher 2021).

Foodbanks are, not surprisingly, a controversial topic. While they have become an unmissable part of the world of 'food aid', there are many who argue that they are an undesirable symptom and symbol of an unequal society. Spring and Biddulph (2020, p. 2), for example, suggest that the donation of surplus food to foodbanks may be counterproductive and serve to enable a 'business-as-usual' model rather than challenging the production of surplus food. From a critical perspective, foodbanks may help to uphold a mistaken impression that structural issues of poverty, including food poverty, can be adequately addressed through voluntary approaches and donation of food by enlightened companies (Poppendieck 2014). By contrast, others argue that foodbanks have an important part to play in mitigating the impact of food insecurity (Bazerghi et al 2016). Operating at their best, the foodbank may be positioned as a 'space of care' where 'new political and ethical engagement' may occur due to those in need of food aid coming together with staff and volunteers in a safe space that offers food and other supports (Cloke et al 2017).

On a broader societal level, provision of food aid may enable governments to justify lower or fewer welfare payments (Cooper et al 2014; Spring & Biddulph 2020). Amongst similar critical perspectives, Caraher and Furey (2017, p. 1) argue that although SFD to community organisations may be beneficial in the short term, there is no evidence to illustrate that the broader issue of food insecurity is altered by it. They argue that linking food waste and food insecurity may 'undermine food poverty as a critical issue of human rights' and can also 'diminish people's choice and their right as citizens to access food in socially acceptable ways'.

Within this critical perspective, there are those who argue that the main benefit from SFD accrues not to those who need the surplus food, but to those in power, such as the key players in the food industry and governments. These institutions can sidestep the larger issues behind food insecurity, that derive from welfare retrenchment and low wage economies, by depoliticising the issues.

Other means of SFD

Surplus food is not only distributed through foodbanks, albeit that this is a currently dominant model in the public perception and policy discourse. Other avenues of SFD include community pantries and social supermarkets, where users have a greater degree of control over their choice of food. Some community and voluntary organisations, especially those with kitchen facilities (and perhaps paid cooks or chefs) will use surplus food by itself, or in conjunction with bought-in food, for on-site meal provision. This might take place in homeless hostels, programmes that provide after-school and in-school meals, and day care centres that provide community meals to people from a wide range of backgrounds (Lambie- Mumford 2019). In some cases, the initiatives are long-established, while in others they are a response to a short-term crisis or immediate difficulty (Lambie-Mumford & Loopstra 2020, p. 200) – of which the Covid-19 pandemic would be a prime example.

Some SFD initiatives draw explicitly on a community development rather than a charity approach. In the following we consider three examples of such approaches from the UK, the US and Ireland.

Marovelli's analysis of urban food sharing initiatives demonstrates that such activities are much more than a response to food insecurity. Participants engage in 'the material and affective elements of cooking and eating together' (2019, p.191). Marovelli presents a case study of three London-based food sharing initiatives, the first two of which made use of surplus food: *Be Enriched*, *Community Shop* and *The Skip Garden and Kitchen*. She shows that despite variation in activities, participants and available resources, all initiatives were underpinned by a 'focus on building stronger and more resilient communities' (2019, p.195). The organisations were dissimilar in terms of their overall strategies to achieve resilient communities: these varied from environmental and sustainability education (*Be Enriched*) to reduction of social and health inequalities through training with vulnerable groups (*The Skip Garden and Kitchen*) to provision of good food at affordable prices and professional development opportunities (*The Community Shop*). All used kitchens as 'spaces of engagement' where people were involved in cooking together and sharing meals. All initiatives provided the opportunity for staff, volunteer and participant interaction through and with food in the physical and social spaces of each organisation (Marovelli 2019, p.195).

In a US context, Herrington and Mix (2021) report on a community-based food initiative in rural Oklahoma where food assistance had 'historically been characterized as disjointed and inefficient' (p. 7). They examine how a sense of dignity is constructed through the everyday experiences of stakeholders and food insecure participants with community initiatives such as food pantries and community meal sites. Dignity was experienced by participants in three social interlinked arenas: relational, individual, and institutional. In the relational arena participants

spoke about their experiences during food procurement (in places such as grocery stores and food pantries) where their 'interactions' (as opposed to 'treatment') impacted positively on their sense of dignity. Interactions that promoted dignity included recipe exchanges and development of friendships and relationships that extended beyond the food site. For individuals, dignity was also promoted when community food initiatives supported participants' familial and cultural traditions and their role as a food provider to their families. This fostered feelings of autonomy, pride and achievement.

In the institutional arena a sense of dignity was influenced by the physical environment of the community food initiative, including location, hours of operation, and the availability of choice. Hetherington and Mix suggest that despite the dominance of market-based strategies in many food assistance organisations and the persistence of inequalities, attention to the relationship between dignity and food 'can begin to restructure the social order at a societal level to promote fairness, equality, and a greater sense of dignity for all individuals, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy of food security' (p. 21).

In Ireland there are numerous examples of food initiatives that have been developed with a community development ethos, though there is no published information on those that make use of SFD specifically. An important public intervention is the Safefood-funded Community Food Initiative (CFI)⁵. Since an initial demonstration project in 2010 that involved seven groups, it has worked with 30 local projects targeted at low-income groups to promote healthy, safe and affordable food. Each project is part of an established community organisation and offers activities in gardening, cooking, shopping and budgeting driven by a community development approach, where locally-identified issues and solutions were central. Skills are transferred from those participating in CFIs to other community members and families. It is significant that as the programme has evolved, prevention of food waste has been identified as a key theme for action.

Surplus food distribution and the impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic was, and continues to be, a significant global phenomenon that has affected many sectors of society and the economy. It has had a significant impact on the global food landscape, with disruptions to established food distribution networks. Ireland, like all other advanced consumer economies, saw a significant decline in eating outside the home, in cafés, restaurants, hotels, workplaces and community settings, and an increase in business for supermarkets, as well as a range of food-related innovations (Galanakis 2021; Grant Thornton 2021; Henchion et al 2022; UCD 2020). There was a 'pivot' to online purchasing and the

⁵ www.safefood.net/community-food-initiatives

establishment of various types of ‘delivery’ service and off-site consumption. Presumably due to the operation of strict lockdowns in the early stages of the pandemic, there was a significant reduction in consumption of ‘takeaway or delivered food’ in the Irish context (UCD 2020, p. 25).

At the onset of the pandemic, much food was ‘stranded’ due to the rapidity of lockdown; panic buying of certain commodities disrupted the retail trade for a period, especially in supermarkets. As food services and the domestic environment are key locations for the generation of food waste, there was the potential for the pandemic to exacerbate the challenge of food waste in complex and sometimes contradictory ways – for example the boom in ‘home cooking’ had the capacity to both increase and decrease food waste (Roe et al 2020). About 16% of Irish respondents to a national survey (UCD 2020, p. 28) reported increased generation of food waste during the pandemic.

In some countries national and local governments intervened to address blockages or failures in food supply: in the US, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) introduced the Farmers to Families Food Box programme that distributed more than 32 million food boxes during May and June of 2020 (Roe et al 2020). The UK also had local government run food box schemes (Gordon et al 2022); a supermarket voucher scheme for children eligible for free school meals, administered by schools; and government emergency funding through the Waste Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to support those involved in food redistribution services (Barker & Russell 2020). The Irish government did not introduce any similar food aid schemes in response to the pandemic, though it did introduce a number of other relevant initiatives, including extended school meal funding⁶; an expansion of the FEAD programme in collaboration with a social enterprise⁷, Good Grub; and initiatives from the Department of Rural and Community Development, including the Community Call initiative⁸ to support local collaborative assistance and the Stability Fund⁹ that supported CVOs during the period of the pandemic.

Impact of Covid-19 on food organisations

A substantial Irish survey of food during the early part of the pandemic was conducted by the Institute of Food and Health at University College Dublin (UCD 2020). It found that impacts on organisations and less advantaged groups in Irish society included: missing school meal provision; increased pressure on those providing non-commercial food services; mental health issues; increased heating and power costs due to being at home; social stressors; and social isolation. According to the survey, community and advocacy groups reported they had been supporting families who have never previously sought help for food provision, due to pandemic-related unemployment (UCD 2020, p. 66).

⁶ www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f3e17-minister-humphreys-extends-school-meals-programme-funding-to-schools-over-the-summer-holidays/

⁷ www.changex.org/blog/how-good-grub-and-foodcloud-served-the-rising-demand-for-food-during-covid-19/

⁸ www.gov.ie/en/press-release/e2a2d-government-commends-the-community-call-fora/

⁹ www.gov.ie/en/publication/b1a7b9-covid-19-community-voluntary-charity-and-social-enterprise/

In terms of pre-existing food support services, the UCD survey (2020, p. 66) reported that ‘social distancing introduced greater complexity for service provision, including the number of individuals who could be offered daily meals in shelters or queuing for soup-runs on the streets.’ Similar findings emerge from UK research (Barker & Russell, 2020; Gordon et al 2022) that highlights the impact of Covid-19 restrictions in terms of physical distancing, travel distance and hygiene. These resulted in significant changes to how those involved in SFD interacted with people and how they distributed food. According to a review of the impact of Covid-19 on SFD in Manchester by Oncini (2021), many organisations reported obstacles, complications and restrictions brought on by the pandemic. Some of those involved in meal provision using surplus food in day centres, for example, could no longer provide food in this manner. Such providers often changed to meal delivery, mirroring the existing meals-on-wheels model.

During lockdown periods, many foodbanks could no longer have people come to their centres. They could respond by delivering food parcels, where volunteers were available. While some organisations reported an increase in availability of volunteers, or even new sources of personnel, others reported many volunteers having to step back due to age- and health-related issues. Some organisations experienced reduced donations, while others felt that the reduced numbers of people out shopping led to them getting more food and other non-food items.

Barker and Russell (2020) point to further challenges for organisations, such as: the need to change operating protocols; the necessity to wear personal protective equipment, that could lead to extra resource demands; and issues of vehicle insurance cover arising from the onus to deliver food. Smaller charities with limited budgets may not have been sufficiently resilient – especially when fundraising opportunities disappeared due to lockdown.

Many people needing to access food aid have had to jump through bureaucratic hoops and prove their eligibility or worthiness to receive free food (de Souza 2019; May et al 2019). During the pandemic, particularly the early days of restrictions, some of these barriers may have been reduced, for example through a relaxation of eligibility criteria or checks or referrals to other providers (Barker & Russell 2020). Increased demand impacted the quality of service that organisations could offer with ‘less tangible forms of support such as financial advice, empathic listening and human warmth [being] partially lost, probably when they were needed more than ever’ (Oncini 2021, p. 1).

In a comprehensive review of food support in the UK during the pandemic, Gordon et al (2022) found that the impact of the pandemic on providers has been substantial. While ‘third sector’ or CVOs were central to the ‘food aid’ response, the challenges remained:

The data ... highlighted levels of fatigue and potential burn out amongst food aid providers. As we expect the economic fall-out of the pandemic to endure for a number of years, there needs to be full, frank and inclusive discussions – at both the national and local levels - of the role that community organisations should and can play in response to food insecurity.

(Gordon et al 2022, p2)

For Barker and Russell (2020), the pandemic 'exposed gaps in understanding of the vagaries of the food supply for certain population groups and systemic weaknesses in the current system of emergency food aid' while 'the sudden emergence of the precariat as a group vulnerable to food insecurity raises new questions about understanding the constraints that precarious working imposes on food habits, dietary inadequacies and dietary excess' (p.868).

Chapter 3: Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods research design that comprised quantitative and qualitative methods. The study objectives as defined in the RFT were to:

1. Identify the types of community groups and charities that provided food during the Covid-19 pandemic
2. Describe how the provision of food during Covid-19 was different from food provision before the pandemic
3. Identify why community groups and charities chose to provide food over other support
4. Show how CVOs connected and interacted with recipients during the pandemic
5. Describe service users' experience in accessing food, in terms of their needs, during Covid-19
6. Outline the challenges and opportunities experienced by CVOs in food provision during the Covid-19 pandemic

Research design

It was important that the research was informed by those who work in, and with, the CVOs partnered with FoodCloud. Thus, the research design was underpinned by collaborative processes that aimed to generate equitable relationships between the research team and those potentially impacted by the research and its outcomes (Fig. 3.1).

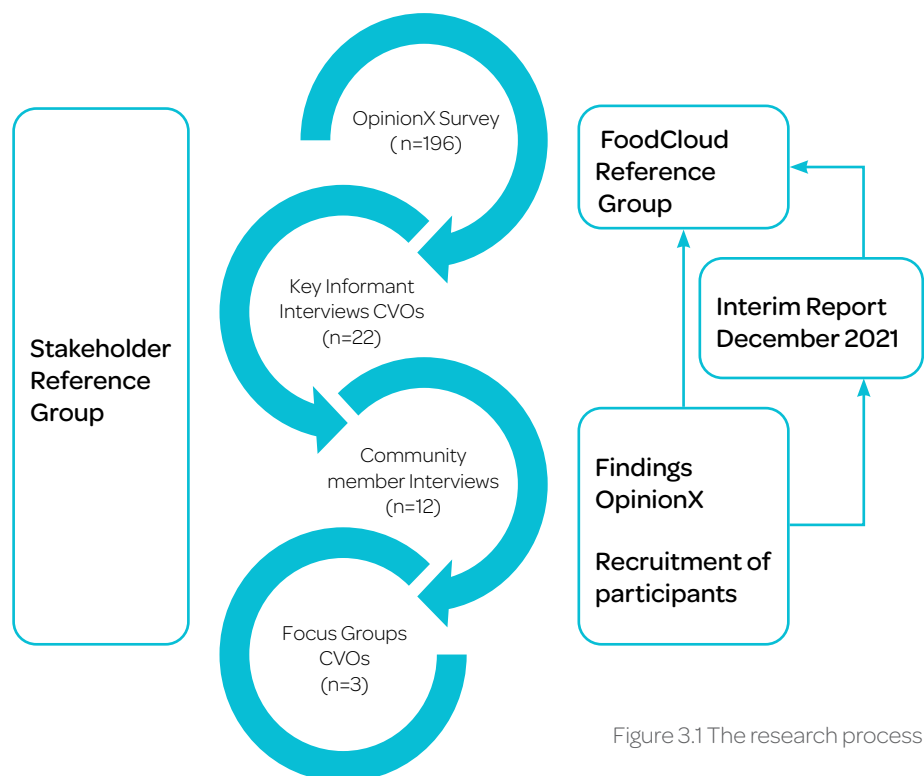


Figure 3.1 The research process

The research process incorporated a Stakeholder Reference Group that collaborated with the research team in discussions about the issues, assumptions and practicalities of the research. This group also engaged with the research team on the construction of indicators for the OpinionX survey (detailed below); on their tacit understandings of how CVOs operate surplus food distribution; and provided guidance on accessing community members who avail of surplus food.

In addition, the research team engaged with FoodCloud's Research Group. This group comprised members of FoodCloud's Board of Management and FoodCloud staff with responsibilities in communications and marketing; logistics strategy; and community development.

The study commenced in September 2021 and was completed in February 2022. Data collection occurred during the period October to December 2021 and involved two participant groups:

- Community and Voluntary Organisations (CVOs) registered with FoodCloud who receive surplus food donations
- Members of CVOs who receive surplus food

The study comprised the following methods:

OpinionX survey

In the research preparatory phase, the innovative user-focused survey platform OpinionX (OpinionX.co) was used to surface CVOs' responses as they related to:

RO2: *How the provision of food during Covid-19 was different from food provision before the pandemic?*

RO3: *Why community groups and charities choose to provide food over other support?*

All CVOs registered with FoodCloud were provided with a link to the OpinionX survey by FoodCloud on behalf of the research team for a period of three weeks between September and October 2021. The survey initially provided 12 statements related to RO2 and RO3. Respondents were asked to rank series of statements in order of importance. They also had the opportunity to add their own opinions, ten of which were added to the ranking stack, resulting in a total of 22 statements.¹⁰

A total of 253 CVOs attempted the OpinionX survey, of which 196 fully engaged by responding to opinions and providing their own (others may have started the survey, chosen not to respond, and re-engaged later). The number of completed responses (n = 196) mirrors those responding to FoodCloud's own survey of July 2020, where 193 CVOs provided information on the impact of the first three months of the pandemic.

¹⁰ The results of the OpinionX survey are at Appendix 1.

The range of respondent organisations (n = 217) is illustrated in Table 3.1. The most frequently occurring types of organisation were 'adult day care' (n = 34), 'food banks' (n = 34) and 'combined' organisations (those engaged in multiple types of service delivery) (n = 33). The breadth of organisation types that responded to the OpinionX survey was similar to those in FoodCloud's July 2020 survey.

Location	Organisation type	Code
urban	Family Resource Centre	FR
rural	Meals-on-wheels	MoW
rural countryside	Community childcare	CC
	Homeless/housing	HO
	Foodbank	FB
	Youth	YS
	Addiction	AS
	Disability	DS
	Adult day care	OP
	Mental health	MH
	Community Centre	CoMC

Table 3.1 Selection criteria for CVOs

Interviews with key informants in community and voluntary organisations

Key Informants (n = 22) participated in an in-depth semi-structured one-to-one interview using the photo-elicitation method. Participant-generated photographs were used to stimulate discussion about:

- how the provision of food during Covid-19 was different from food provision before the pandemic (RO2)
- how CVOs connected and interacted with recipients during the pandemic (RO4)
- the challenges and opportunities experienced by CVOs in food provision during the Covid-19 pandemic (RO6)

The interviews were also shaped by the results of the OpinionX survey that ranked indicators of importance in CVOs' food provision practices during the pandemic. All interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams or Zoom and video- and audio-recorded with permission. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

Interviews with community members

Community members who received surplus food through a CVO partnered with FoodCloud (n = 12) participated in a semi-structured one-to-one interview using the photo-elicitation method. Participant-generated photographs were used to stimulate discussion about:

- background and living circumstances
- impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on daily and family life
- how surplus food provided through CVO was used
- the impact of accessing food support on health and wellness; and experiences using the service

All interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams or Zoom and video and audio-recorded with permission. Each interview lasted between 40 and 75 minutes.

Focus groups

During February 2022, CVOs that had participated in interviews participated in three focus group discussions. Aligned with the participatory research design outlined above, the aim of each discussion was to elicit the perspectives of key informants from CVOs on the draft research findings and conclusions.

Of the 22 CVOs involved in the earlier interviews, a total of 15 responded positively to their invitation to participate in a focus group. Overall, 12 of the original 15 CVOs participated in these discussions. They were conducted across the Zoom platform and each discussion took around one hour. Participants were asked to reflect on the extent to which the findings reflected their context and experience, and what, if any, practices they would keep from their experience of SFD during the Covid-19 pandemic. The discussions were recorded and have been used to inform the study conclusions and recommendations.

Sample and recruitment of participants

Key informants in Community and Voluntary Organisations

FoodCloud has a broad membership base of community and voluntary organisations. The research was primarily qualitative and, as such, does not claim to provide evidence that may be deemed representative of FoodCloud's membership base. Nevertheless, purposive sampling has been used in the selection of potential participants. This means that the main organisation types have been represented, but some less populated categories such as migrant centres, education services and places of worship are not included. All types of organisation did participate in the OpinionX survey.

We developed a sample frame by undertaking a preliminary analysis of CVOs in FoodCloud's membership database. Keyword searching of the database determined salient information such as size/scale; purpose; target groups; organisation type (formal, informal group or project); and geographic location (rural, urban or suburban). From this, and discussions with FoodCloud, a typology of organisation types was developed from which to sample potential CVO participants. The selection criteria are outlined in Table 3.1 above. It was important to comply with GDPR regulations and the ethical protocols established for the research. To this end, and to ensure that the recruitment of potential participants was voluntary and that their identity would not be known by FoodCloud, a general invitation to the research was sent by FoodCloud to potential participants that were randomly selected using the above criteria and then invited to participate in the research. Potential CVO participants were asked to contact the research team if interested in participation. Though the initial target was 15 CVO participants, following further invitations to a wider sample using the same selection criteria, 22 participated in interviews. Of the 22 CVOs, 12 were in a rural town, six in an urban city, and four in an urban town. None was in the rural countryside.

Although four organisations were categorised as foodbanks, other organisations, such as Family Resource Centres and housing agencies, also engaged in foodbank services. Family Resource Centres were slightly over-represented in the sample, otherwise the profile of respondents closely reflected the distribution of CVO types in the FoodCloud database, which had been used as the basis for the original sampling process.

Community members

Discussions with FoodCloud and with the Stakeholder Reference Group considered how best to recruit community members who received surplus food through CVOs partnered with FoodCloud. As it was important to ensure potential participants' voluntary participation and to protect their identity, convenience and snowball sampling took place through the CVOs. Following an invitation sent on behalf of the researchers by FoodCloud to all CVOs that had been contacted about the research, CVOs were asked to relay information about the research to any community members who might be willing to participate. Recruitment also took place directly by the researchers at the end of each CVO key informant interview and through follow-up contact. The aim was to interview 15 participants, but given the time-constraints, the ongoing pandemic and the Christmas period, recruitment ceased after the completion of 12 interviews. In appreciation of their involvement, all community member participants received a €50 One for All Voucher.

Ethical considerations

Research ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

Participants were provided with the study information sheet. This outlined the research to be undertaken; the benefits of the research for individuals and organisations; what their participation would involve; and issues of confidentiality and GDPR compliance.

In terms of the use of photographic data, participants were advised that images should only contain meal/cooking/shopping events and not people's faces. Participants were asked for, and granted, their permission for the researchers to use photographs in the report, presentations or other publications.

Data analysis

Interview data

Data management and analysis was a reflexive and iterative process and involved:

- digital audio-recording of each key informant and community member interview and contemporaneous notetaking
- summary written notes of each interview's content and reflections on conduct
- recordings were reviewed and clean verbatim transcribed
- transcriptions were transferred to and managed in NVivo 12 qualitative software database
- deductive content analysis of summary notes and transcriptions were undertaken by CD and were reviewed by MS, then followed by agreement of themes
- The final stage involved all researchers (MS, CD, PS) in the inductive analysis of themes identified in the previous stage and the identification of illustrative examples, including images, to demonstrate the meaning of the themes from the participants' perspectives.

Composite narratives

In addition to the thematic analysis, the community member interview data has been used to generate four 'composite narratives'. These short narratives have been developed through the combination of data from several interviews and are presented as a story from a single individual. In line with the research design, which seeks to produce evidence that is informed by, and meaningful to, those with direct experience of SFD in communities and organisations, this approach allows the findings to be communicated to a broad audience and simultaneously provides a picture of the group as a whole (Willis, 2019).

Importantly, the composite narratives are not contrived, rather, the approach is systematic and 'directly related to people's experiences and perceptions' (Piper & Sikes 2010, p. 43), as they accessed food during Covid-19; they also address broader experiences of receiving surplus food. Each composite is based on interviews with participants who were in receipt of surplus food from a CVO during the Covid-19 pandemic:

1. All quotations come directly from the interview data
2. The narrative does not provide researcher judgement on the community members' accounts of their experiences and their opinions. Any comments of this nature in the narrative are taken directly from the respondents' written words.

These procedures establish a robust approach and ensure the composite narratives are rooted solidly in the data. This approach allows for synthesis of the key themes identified during analysis of the interview data (McElhinney & Kennedy 2021). The names attached to each composite are pseudonyms. The photographs do not portray real people; they are AI-generated images derived from thispersondoesnotexist.com

Study strengths and limitations

The study was comprehensive in terms of its application of a mixed-methods approach. This comprised a structured survey of CVOs about food provision during the pandemic using the OpinionX platform; qualitative interviews with key informants in CVOs, qualitative interviews with community members who receive surplus food; and focus groups with a sample of key informants that had taken part in an earlier interview. The OpinionX survey helped to surface issues of importance to CVOs and the development of the interview guides.

The study was further strengthened using the photo-elicitation technique that allowed participants to explain their circumstances through their own pictures of the role of surplus food in their organisations and in the case of community members, their everyday lives. Photographs when used as a research technique can help to bridge the gap between participants' worlds and that of the researchers. The approach has provided greater context to our understanding of participants' situation than would have occurred in a standard interview without the use of visual aids (Croghan et al 2008, p. 355).

The study was also enhanced by attention to collaborative processes in key stages of the research with the Stakeholder Reference Group and the FoodCloud Research Group, and in the final focus groups where the draft findings were discussed with CVOs that had participated in interviews.

Given its scale, the research does not claim to represent the experiences of all CVOs that partner with FoodCloud, nor of all community members who avail of surplus food. Nonetheless, much effort went into closely examining the profile of CVOs that partner with FoodCloud to produce a sample frame that broadly represented the range of organisation types. Recruitment for CVO participants was carried out using the sample frame. There has been a greater participation from CVOs based in rural areas than cities. Overall, though, the sample of CVOs does represent the main categories of organisations involved with FoodCloud. We suggest that their experiences are likely to be comparable other CVOs within the same categories.

In relation to the participation of community members who receive surplus food, it should also be noted that the sample was self-selecting and it is possible that those who participated may have had more interest and involvement in food than those who did not participate.

Chapter 4: CVO perspectives

This chapter addresses ROs 2, 4 and 6

- Describes how the provision of food during Covid-19 was different from food provision before the pandemic (RO2)
- Shows how CVOs connected and interacted with recipients during the pandemic (RO4)
- Outlines the challenges and opportunities experienced by CVOs in food provision during the Covid-19 pandemic (RO6)

The chapter briefly outlines the distribution of surplus food by CVOs prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. The remainder of the chapter focuses on SFD during the pandemic period March 2020 – February 2022. From the analysis of the interview data with key informants from 22 CVOs, it is structured around seven key themes, with 24 sub-themes within those. Each theme is presented with direct quotations in the words of the research participants and, where appropriate, selected images from the photo-elicitation element of the research are reproduced. These images are not just decorative or illustrative, they form a strand of visual evidence created and contextualised by participants.

How was food provision different pre-Covid-19?

Participants were asked to reflect on how they operated their food service before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the memory of the onset of the crisis in March 2020 could be recalled by most, interviews were dominated by accounts of what CVOs *currently* do. As the pandemic was (when interviews were conducted, in late 2021) very much part of their everyday lives¹¹ there was, despite considerable probing, little detail expressed about the operation of services prior to March 2020. As this is the first study of its kind, there was no baseline data to compare with.

Nonetheless, some key changes were identified. Pre-pandemic, CVO services had been characterised by relatively close physical contact with their community members. Foodbanks had, unsurprisingly, not required people to physically distance while queueing, nor to wear face

¹¹ Some interviewees were having to deal with Covid-19 within their own households and organisations at the time of interview

coverings. CVOs' food services had been provided to a largely stable community membership, defined by the organisation's focus. Meal provision in residential settings had been a *communal onsite activity* that supported social interaction and wellbeing among staff and residents. Apart from meals-on-wheels providers, CVOs had not engaged in food parcel or meal delivery and had mainly operated onsite services. Fundraising had been an important activity for the overall organisation and for food-related activities. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, there had been greater involvement of volunteers and CE/Tús scheme workers in their organisations.

Food provision during the pandemic

Since March 2020, CVOs have had to operate their services in line with stringent government Covid-19-related public health guidelines. The CVO food provision experience during the pandemic was particularly marked by the events surrounding the first 'lockdown' in March 2020. CVOs that operated onsite day services (such as childcare, adult day services or youth services) were no longer accessible to community members. By necessity, providers of residential services remained open but needed to reconfigure their accommodation and service delivery to protect staff and residents (with social spacing, increased levels of cleaning and restrictions on visits). Meals-on-wheels operators continued to provide meal delivery services, but within a range of restrictions. Fundraising was severely constrained, as lockdown restrictions meant that events, collections and other activities could not take place as normally.

This chapter, based on interviews with representatives of 22 CVOs within the FoodCloud network, identifies seven key themes, and 24 sub-themes, that embrace and express the challenge of operation under the constraints of the pandemic. The overarching themes are as follows:

- moving food to people
- new ways of operating
- labour and logistics
- types of food/non-food
- relationships with retailers
- making and keeping connections
- adding value to surplus food

These themes and the consequent sub-themes are illustrated in Table 4.1

Theme	Sub-themes
Moving food to people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● New demands ● New supplies
New ways of operating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Food parcels ● New ways to keep everyone safe ● Packing and bagging
Labour and logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Workforce ● Physical labour ● Emotional labour and empathy ● Organisational and managerial capacities ● Knowledge, skills, techniques, experience and knowhow ● Technology and infrastructure
Types of food/non-food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bread ● Culturally appropriate food ● Nutritional quality ● Non-food items
Relationships with retailers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding needs
Making and keeping connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Keeping people connected ● Food: a conversation starter ● Identification of unmet needs
Adding value to surplus food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Alternative networks for redistribution ● Raising awareness of the value in surplus food ● Creative practices
Economic impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Costs ● Benefits

Table 4.1 Food provision during the pandemic: Themes and subthemes

Moving food to people

As outlined in Chapter 2, SFD is, at its base, about moving food from where it is not wanted or valued, to where there is a demand or a need. It is thus about ‘moving food to people’. This process, or set of processes, was impacted significantly by the pandemic, with increased demand, and demand from more varied groups, coupled with diverse changes in the supply of surplus food. There was also a need to increase the amount of ‘movement’, as many CVOs now had to pay as much attention to moving food to off-site locations as they previously had to moving food ‘in’ to centres.

New demands

Participants emphasised that the period of the pandemic, especially the first lockdown, was characterised by fear of the unknown and well-founded concerns about community members and staff safety.

Established meals-on-wheels providers, for example, experienced a significantly greater demand for their services. Their reach was extended both to those who had previously received onsite services and to new service users, who may previously have received support from family and/or friends:

“The FoodCloud food doubled ... double amount of people looking for help ... our service went up by about 30% because you know daughters who cook for their mum couldn’t go to the house, right?”

(Phelim, MoW 1)¹²

“We didn’t close down ... our numbers increased traffic hugely ... up to over 300 meal deliveries every single day, because family members were calling in, they weren’t able to get home to their families. The older people were cocooning and there’s just that mad panic of what are we going to do? And so, we were extremely, extremely busy, but it was good because we were able to react.”

(Dearbhla, OP1)

Justin’s service (HO2), which supported people with housing, found that during the pandemic there was a greater reliance on his CVO for food support. Some community members were in poor health and fearful of contracting Covid-19. Similarly, Jane’s Family Resource Centre reported greater demands on its service:

“There was a high demand. There was definitely an increase in families signing up. There was definitely that increase there.”

(Jane, FR3)

For CVOs that operated foodbanks, the increased demand came from people in a variety of circumstances, such as those in low wage casual employment (such as the entertainment industry) who had lost jobs at the start of the pandemic; those with children and/or young people living at home who had previously been in receipt of school meals; and older people who were not ‘online’.

Many people living on limited means or tight budgets, who would never previously have sought food aid, became new users of services:

“People who would never use a food bank, all of a sudden, their income drastically reduced. They still had the same bills. They still had their mortgage payments and stuff and so they weren’t able to ... They had no disposable income. And yeah, people were

¹² Codes for participants’ organisational location can be found in Fig. 3.1 on p. 22 of this report

saying, oh well, they're getting €350. But, if you're on an income, you know when you were barely managing ... you have no resources available to you when you hit that crisis."

(Julie, FB3)

"There was a lot of say people in the town or immigrants or refugees, they might have been coming through a refugee program and they might have been, some of them might have been washing cars and doing stuff like that, because we have people - you see them in every town."

(Feargal, FB1)

CVOs, like Sonia's, that engaged with young people, saw greater demands from families who experienced pandemic-related job losses while also having children at home all the time:

"A lot of people were out of work or there might be a one-parent family that could have lost a job or whatever you know. But I just think maybe losing jobs, I think jobs, for me losing jobs is the biggest one. Because anyone that I did deliver food to over the pandemic like they said they used to have this certain amount of income a week. Now they're down to whatever and they're struggling to buy food. It's costing more to have the kids at home because they're eating more. Whereas if they're in school they're not eating as much. But they're at home and they're in the fridge all day."

(Sonia, YS1)

There was a shared experience across nearly all services of *significant increases* in the demand for food.

New supplies

At the same time as there was a change in the *demand* for food, there were also changes in its *supply*. For CVOs that had had to close their operation, there was the question of how to deal with supplies that were already in-house and could not be provided to service users in the usual way. Some were able to move food on to other organisations within their network who were doing food deliveries:

"I would have had a lot of excess. So, I contacted ... and... I passed anything that I could on to them and then also I did I think three/four drops to different projects within the inner city in Dublin."

(Marie, YS2)

New supplies could mean new types of food, as well as changes in quantity. For example, Phelim's organisation provided a meals-on-wheels service during the pandemic. He observed that in his

area, unusually, supermarkets were experiencing lower customer numbers. This meant that his FoodCloud assigned retailer had more food available for his service, such that they 'did brilliantly well during Covid with them'. They received more meat and less bread during the early months of the pandemic. This change, however, was temporary:

"Back in the end of maybe June/July our quantity hasn't decreased but our quality of gear coming into us isn't so hot like or suitable for us."

(Phelim, MoW1)

Other CVOs spoke about how, at the onset of the pandemic, they had received large volumes of food from restaurants and other organisations that were closing because of the lockdown. Thus Maura (DS1) spoke about a 'massive delivery of Easter eggs' and Feargal (FB1) of 'unusual' goods from TK Maxx.

The unanticipated arrival of more food and/or new types of food brought challenges. Some CVOs, especially those with kitchens or suitable storage facilities, had the capacity to adapt. For example, Alison (AS1) reported receiving 'unusual donations' that, as a residential service with full kitchen and catering staff, they could respond positively to:

"There are a couple of businesses local that would be in catering and hotels or whatever. And when they closed down, they donated some of the contents of their cold room and freezers to us ... we would have got unusual donations like fresh cream and stuff. Stuff that you wouldn't normally get you know from hotels ... We can turn it over because we deal with it on site whereas other groups yes, you'd be waiting for maybe to organize it to get it out to families. Plus it wouldn't be like if you get stuff from hotels and catering facilities. By and large it's catering size and like you wouldn't be walking into somebody's house maybe with a container with 6 pints of cream in it."

(Alison, AS1)

Sara, a catering manager in a CVO that provided housing, found herself in the fortunate position of being able to provide high value food to residents:

"We were very lucky, much to the awful end of the hotels closing on the 12th of March last year. You know, we got so many donations. We were given fillet steaks. We were given ... the best of food, so I allotted to do fillet steaks for dinner for Saint Patrick's Day dinner last year. And I came in and I worked it and it was a stunning dinner."

(Sara, HO1)

For other CVOs, the pandemic food surplus brought challenges. Fred's organisation, previously involved in broad community food engagement activities, had joined FoodCloud at the start of the pandemic and initiated a foodbank service, in response to an identified community need. Like many other CVOs, they relied on volunteers to collect food from the FoodCloud hub and on sponsors to meet transportation costs. Dealing with surplus meant extra costs in terms of time and money:

"You see they got crisps and Doritos here and they're saying thanks so much to [name of organisation] who sponsored a delivery of food pallets from FoodCloud in Dublin and they arrived yesterday. ... some of the food that arrived is short-dated and we can't use it in the food bank. So, it goes to [name] in 'Feed our Homeless' so nothing goes to waste. But ... as the pandemic lifted and volunteers went back to work, they couldn't accept that food because they didn't have the time to get it delivered to 'feed our homeless'. So, it was duplication because it was getting sent from Dublin to [place name] and they were sending it back down to Dublin to feed the homeless."

(Fred, FB2)

We saw above that Sara was able to make good use of the 'unusual surplus' of fillet steaks. A delivery of dozens of cans of artichoke hearts (Photo 1) posed more of a challenge:



Photo 1: Artichoke hearts (Sara, HO1)

"I put them in a soup, and it was horrendous. And then we had one worker that worked here, he was vegan, so we used to try and say to him 'Please take some home'."

So, I'm going to tell you how I ended up with all of these. My nice manager in [Retailer B] ... said to me 'my friend working over in [place name] has a huge amount of food. There's €500 worth of food over there. Do you think you could get access to that?' And I said, 'what is it'? And he went 'Oh, it's the best of food. It's the same as what I sort of give you here'."

I said 'OK'. So, I sent my two maintenance men over to [place name] which is about 40 minutes' drive and they came back with - oh my God! There must have been twelve trays of artichoke hearts. Maybe twelve trays of olives, jackfruit, oh my God! ... There was maybe packets of rice and little bit of couscous now and again - we bread the chicken with it if we have a bit of a build up with it - ... But really it was the greatest waste, you know. But there was chocolate and there was stuff that we could use. You know even we get to the point where the chocolate is too much."

(Sara, HO1)

Unexpected sources of food could thus be a benefit, but this depended on the capacity to move it on to those who could use it, or who have the capacity to store or process it.

New ways of operating

The onset of Covid-19 required CVOs, like those in the commercial food sector, to rethink their approach to food provision. All CVOs were involved in delivery of social care services, often on-site. The social distancing and travel restrictions of lockdown forced changes in their everyday routines and the adoption of new ways to operate. These included the make-up and distribution of food parcels; adherence to a range of new health and safety measures; and, in the case of foodbanks and delivery services, alternative packing and bagging arrangements.

Food parcels

Unable to provide on-site or 'pick-up' meal services, CVOs 'pivoted' to the delivery of food parcels to those they felt were in need, as Margaret, who managed a Community Child Care Centre, explained:

"In the past we had an open-door policy here where parents could come in and we'd, you know whatever food we had, we'd have it, you know, displayed. ... they could pick what they wanted. But because of Covid that has all changed. So, what we do here is, we do our parcels for who we know would need it."

(Margaret, CC1)

Although Sonia's youth centre had to close at the onset of the pandemic, she was reluctant to stop their food service. No longer in a position to cook food on-site, they delivered food to families who had contacted them:

"Normally we would collect the FoodCloud and bring it back into us here in the centre and we'd do dinners and make soups or whatever ... when the pandemic hit it was hard times, we were in lockdown, we didn't want to not take the FoodCloud. What we did find

was like families were ringing and looking for support and, you know, is there any food available? ... we ended up going out every night of the week with food and delivering to different houses."

(Sonia, YS1)

The situation was similar for Maura, who ran a CVO for young people with disabilities. It closed its service at the start of the pandemic and then moved to food deliveries:

"We did have a few families approach or saying that they were struggling and things like that and then that was when we came across FoodCloud and they just said look, we're doing community food ... we'd come in every Friday, and we'd package up these food hampers. And then ... a community responder was out delivering to families from our club and families in the community as well."

(Maura, DS1)

New ways to keep everyone safe

Covid-19 restrictions required CVOs to comply with a plethora of new health and safety measures. How they managed their food provision service was circumscribed by the two metre social distancing requirements and hygiene measures:

"We were operating out of [place] which it was a very small room. And when we had to consider like you know, social distancing and staff working together. We were like 'we cannot operate safely from there'. So, we moved to in [place name] which had two different doors. So, somebody could come in one and then out the other. ... there was no privacy."

(Julie, FB3)

"We got trained in so many things - how to wash your hands, how to serve food. You know I redid my HACCP there a few months ago and it had a huge Covid element added to it."

(Sara, HO1)

"[We] have to sanitise like everything you know and all the touch surfaces and make sure that there's plenty of you know wipes and stuff for them to use. Even though we did have our routines there. But like sanitising that happens twice a day, every day, no matter what. All our light switches and frequently touched surfaces ... so there's a lot of changes."

(Marie, YS2)

Clearly the extra Covid demands of hygiene, social distancing, cleaning and other practices were a significant burden on the operation of the SFD services.

Packing and bagging

For foodbanks and CVOs that operated a delivery service, the necessary tasks of packing and bagging were more challenging during the Covid-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic, community foodbank members had usually brought their own bags, but the pandemic required a new way of operating:

“We had to change because we didn’t want to take in anybody’s bag. So, we started pre-pack. So, we had to buy plastic bags, etc, ... The paper bags were no good, they weren’t strong enough. [also] we decided - look we’ve too many people in the food bank. We need to reduce. We’re gonna have only four people in there at any one time on a Tuesday or Friday giving out food and then four turns out to be the right number. You’ve one person doing the administration sitting down and checking the documents, etc, etc, and three people then packing or handing out the food and then getting food from the freezers or giving it out. And maybe one person on site for a while making sure everybody kept two meters apart and wearing their masks.”

(Feargal, FB1)

“In the old days they used to bring a bag. But because of Covid and what have you that’s when we started to get the heavy-duty bin liners which we were also granted money for.”

(Noelle, CoMC1)

The plastic bin bags mentioned by Noelle also featured in Julie’s (FB3) account of Covid-19-related packing and bagging arrangements. She reflected on the added costs and environmental impact of using large volumes of these bags, as well as the negative connotations associated with receiving surplus food in a black bag (Photo 2):



“So even little things like the black plastic bags that we pack the food into, that is costing us approximately €8000 per year on black plastic bags. So, it’s not environmentally friendly. And we’re conscious that there’s no dignity in somebody receiving a black plastic bag down a laneway.”

(Julie, FB3)

Photo 2: Black bin bags (Julie, FB3)

Labour and logistics

From the evidence provided by participants, there is a significant amount of work involved in SFD, carried out by varied types of workers. Workers include volunteers and paid staff of CVOs and retailers, while the types of work can include physical labour, emotional work, organisational and managerial capacities and creative thinking. 'Logistics' can include technological and infrastructural resources, that range from vans to fridges to rosters and HACCP training. The evidence gets to the heart of how SFD is carried out in practical ways by CVOs and the associated challenges and opportunities that arise.

Workforce

As outlined above, CVOs emphasised the increased demand on their services, particularly amongst foodbanks and those that 'pivoted' to food delivery services. CVOs also related the impact of Covid-19 on their volunteer base and CE/Tús¹³ workers. Together these changes generated significant workforce challenges associated with handling increased volumes of food and people.

Meals-on-wheels providers and foodbank operators that had a high reliance on volunteers experienced a decline in volunteering, particularly as older people were advised by public health bodies to 'cocoon'. Such CVOs were also mindful of protecting the health and welfare of their own staff and service users, so limited the engagement of volunteers:

"We made the decision earlier on, only four people in. Because prior to that it could be, six, seven or eight whatever - it's too many, right? So, we learned that lesson quickly that four was enough, but we also found out that a few of our volunteers had underlying conditions, so they had to step back."

(Feargal, FB1)

"We banned all volunteering. We didn't allow anybody into the building for the first year because our clients are so vulnerable health wise. ... So, it left us with no volunteers ... our Tús [CE] workers were told through the pandemic they didn't have to go to work."

(Sara, HO1)

As Sara noted above, Tús/CE workers were advised to stay at home, and this impacted on the operation of services. Although most meals-on-wheels providers were depleted of volunteers, one CVO was an exception and found that people in the wider community were eager to provide support, resulting in a small increase to their volunteer base:

¹³ CE and Tús are varieties of state-funded social employment schemes, frequently made use of by CVOs and other non-profit organisations

"We were very lucky, the GAA locally were just phenomenal. They were so, so good. I actually think it brought a whole new community spirit back ... we're in a busy town and an awful lot of people would say to me 'gosh I didn't know ye did that' ... I actually had too many volunteers in the end offering their services."

(Dearbhla, OP1)

Sandra's foodbank had also relied on older people as volunteers. At the onset of the pandemic her foodbank experienced labour shortages, but this resolved itself over the progress of the pandemic:

"A lot of volunteers would be in the over-60s cohort and as a result they had to cocoon. Initially I was given some staff that were redeployed to me from various other areas. But then, when things came back, I still had a bit of a problem with staff, with volunteers. But not now."

(Sandra, FB4)

Eithne, too, was depleted of the older volunteer drivers and kitchen assistants needed to operate her meals-on-wheels service:

"I lost all my drivers, because they were all over 80 [Oh, my goodness!], a lot of them were between 70 and 80, a lot of them were retired people that were doing this voluntary, as you know, and I lost all of them. I lost all my volunteers in the kitchen as well, because a lot of them were elderly as well."

(Eithne, OP2)

This meant that Eithne had to do everything herself:

"I cook and prepare the potatoes and the meat and then I serve it into the trays myself and then seal them up, and I have to label them all with whoever, because if there were coeliacs or diabetics or whatever, I have to keep all of them separate, and then I go on the road and deliver them."

(Eithne, OP2)

One Family Resource Centre re-joined FoodCloud at the beginning of the pandemic. Ellen spoke of the 'strain' in the early stages, when CE workers were not working with them:

"Well, more manpower would have been good, but whilst we were working behind closed doors, all the CE staff or the majority of them were told to stay away from work. So, there was just that kind of core element of us for a long time in the offices. ... I did

feel the strain of it and then more towards the end of the year a few staff were able to come back in and I did have help in that regard and people are very helpful at the centre. ... I did all the deliveries. It took a while and it did take up an awful lot of my time but at the same time I didn't really want to hand that off to anybody else because I didn't wanna lose that connection either."

(Ellen, FR1)

For Sonia, it was important to get food to their community members who were no longer attending the youth service. The service expanded to the wider community and demanded large volumes of time and energy at all hours of the day and evening in delivering food parcels:

"We delivered every night of the week Monday to Sunday cause [Retailer C] were very good to us. Like the staff even started bringing clothes for families that needed it, you know. And [Retailer C] also gave us a food appeal, last Christmas and we made I think it was like over €2000 worth of food. And then we made like over 80 hampers out of that food then for families."

(Sonia, YS1)

Physical labour

CVOs handle large volumes of food. Food is often heavy, bulky and difficult to handle. Julie explained the logistical challenges and labour intensity of SFD with reference to the image reproduced at Photo 3:

"We'd end up going to our neighbours and saying, can you help us just for a few hours ... to physically move the pallets off the truck, into the warehouse and then up onto the racking. So, the forklift was a huge issue, especially when the pandemic hit because the volume of food coming into the warehouse increased ... all the staff here were saying we cannot cope with just having a forklift for one week. ... their backs were sore and stuff. ... we had to make the decision to have a 12-month lease ... at least physically it's easier when you can move stuff with a forklift."

(Julie, FB3)



Photo 3 Logistical challenges (Julie, FB3)

Moving food around often required a combination of an available person's time, their own vehicle, and the physical capacity to lift and move the food. This was difficult when CVOs were dependent on the good will of volunteers:

"Voluntary help is quite transient. You might get somebody for a short while. Particularly with the FoodCloud it's sort of more a concern because there's so much dependency on a vehicle. It's a big ask for somebody to volunteer and then use their vehicle, and you've got liability issues then, and it's also very heavy. The stuff is so heavy."

(Noelle, CoMC1)

The physical work of moving the food could pose a risk to the CVO volunteer workforce:

"They're not young people and to ask them to collect now when we're going out getting, well, the [Retailer C] crates are packed to the last, and they're always heavy. ... I hurt my back this year actually. Now I'm not the sort of person I don't agree with claiming and all of this rubbish. I just minded myself for a few weeks and it was bloody sore, but I know it was from moving a crate. And I thought I have to be really careful. So, I'm very mindful of that when we talk about volunteers."

(Noelle, CoMC1)

Emotional labour and empathy

As outlined later in this chapter, the work of SFD is highly dependent on the establishment and maintenance of *relationships*: within and across CVOs, with service users, with retailers and suppliers, and with the broader community. This requires significant emotional labour, care work and empathy.

CVOs involved in meals-on-wheels provision emphasise that food is not simply 'dropped off' but also involves social interaction and care work. Those involved in SFD often deal with people who experience challenging life circumstances. In their accounts of how they work, participants highlight the emotional labour involved in SFD and the need for empathy, understanding and a non-judgemental approach:

"The family I told you about with the four children, and the illness and whatnot. I met them, you know, I was put in contact with them because of the food parcels ... now you know we have a long-standing relationship whereby it's about making connections. I don't just go and drop off the food at the door, I'm just talking about this family, for example ... It's about more than just the food, it's about emotional connection as well, and knowing that there is support out there and it's non-judgmental. And there's

somebody who you can talk to and ask about anything you want and find out what other services that are available should you need them you know."

(Ellen, FR1)

"I think you just have to be human and have compassion. That's how I see it. You just have to have compassion but also sensitivity. And remember that you're not some angel swooping in. You're just one human giving something to another human. That's the way I see it."

(Ellen, FR1)

It is particularly important to many CVOs that service is delivered in a consciously non-stigmatising and inclusive way:

"When people come in and I just kind of encourage them. That it's not a stigma. The food, you're helping less food wastage ... if you need it come and take it. No one's judging you by coming in the door. That's the biggest thing I'm trying to get out there. It's no judgement whatsoever by coming through the doors. It's a community thing."

(Jane, FR3)

"It's quite a source of shame to be getting a food parcel. Not something that you can kind of say - I'm giving you this and like you should be delighted with it - Is there anyone looking at me? It's very inclusive."

(Phelim, MoW1)

Through her photo (Photo 4) of how surplus food is distributed at her FRC, Alice conveyed an approach that was empathetic and non-stigmatising:



Photo 4 Boxes of cereal for collection (Alice, FR2)

"Anything that we haven't used in the creche in the week we just leave it out for people to take so, it isn't anyway stigmatised or targeted really ... we basically leave food out for parents on the way in and out so when they're collecting this evening its regular and they know it's there ... it's just the normalisation ... you know it's very acceptable in the centre that extra food is for everybody ... nobody is under any scrutiny if they take something."

(Alice, FR2)

Organisational and managerial capacities

Once CVOs accept the food through the FoodCloud app, or through any other channel, they must 'move it on', often quickly – especially if they lack storage or freezers. CVOs' accounts show that this process can be far from straightforward and may encompass many organisational and logistical processes.

The first stage is often to identify what surplus food can be of most value to the CVO. Ellen, who works in a Family Resource Centre, explains how SFD can be a 'struggle' in terms of work, time, cost and sorting through food to determine its 'usability':

"I have to drive 12 miles in and 12 miles back and I don't have the time, nor do we have the money for fuel, to then be throwing [food] away because it can't be consumed. So, it can be hit and miss, and it can be a struggle. But we do what we can ... I ended up having to go through every single bit they gave us. Because you know, some of it was very clearly not fit for human consumption. ... it may have only happened on three occasions, but it was three occasions too many to keep doing that run every Tuesday. I'm only part time so I had to work out what was most economical and practical."

(Ellen, FR1)

Alison, similarly, talks about the organisational challenges:

"It requires work just to make sure it's managed properly so that you don't be overdosed. ... it's just about managing it and kind of staying on top of it. ... sometimes, yeah, it can get away on you a little bit. But then you just have to kind of control, take control of it again, you know."

(Alison, AS1)

Technology and infrastructure

CVOs normally require organisational resources that may include fridges and freezers, storage space, a suitable workspace, vehicles, and a system for handling the food that they receive. Where sufficient such infrastructure is available, CVOs explain their systems for handling surplus food as organised and efficient:

"I have a freezer bag ready, and I always make sure there is if we have it in stock a fish, a chicken, you know. Our freezers work first-in first-out. ... Always within the month itself. So, it's a system that's set up. ... I always make sure there's a good mix of something that people would use on a daily basis in the bag."

(Jane, FR3)

Such systems can be quite complex and elaborate:

“We have packing here in the warehouse every week and we have a set bag. So, we pack, and you know maybe 300 bags every week. And then the food is distributed to the food bank ... they give us the use of a room we used to do it every week. But now ... the second and the last Friday of every month. And the night before, we would bring as much product as possible. It’s a really small room. So, we pack it and then we distribute it then to clients that come. Also, we transport a lot of stock to the organisations that we would work with.”

(Julie, FB3)

“The food is collected by the vans, brought to a holding area outside of that kitchen, the chef goes out to the holding area to sort food, then decides what’s to be frozen and what can be used straight away. And then whatever ... straight away is brought into that unit ... We don’t bring the goods directly to that area, right? ... we keep the stuff outside ... There’s a holding area and she sorts ... and freezes or uses. If it’s used it goes in there to that kitchen.”

(Phelim, MoW1)

Some CVOs experience challenges with handling food in the absence of adequate infrastructure and spoke of their efforts to source equipment to make their work easier. Eithne’s meals-on-wheels service provides 40 to 50 meals a day. Through her photo (Photo 5) she explained how her ability to handle surplus food improved when she received enough donations to buy a new fridge freezer:

“That’s the new fridge. We got a new fridge and a freezer. I had an old fridge-freezer for a long, long time and I suppose it was really old and I was hoping someone would donate it ... eventually I got one. [We had] bits and pieces of vouchers and money and things like that, so we bought a fridge freezer out of it. [Q. what difference does that then make to what you do?] Huge, because the other fridge wasn’t really working.”

(Eithne, OP2)



Photo 5 Fridge #1 (Eithne, OP2)

Noelle had a similar story about sourcing funding for an extra fridge and a [Retailer C] donated freezer (Photo 6):

“Yes, that’s to show that there’s a second fridge. And that is a freezer that we paid out of our own money. The white freezer we bought with our own money. Next to that this side you can’t see it is the [Retailer C] one that was donated. So, the two stainless fridge freezers we applied for funding from the local Community Enterprise Program.”

(Noelle, ComC1)



Photo 6 Fridge #2 (Noelle, ComC1)

Knowledge, skills, techniques, experience and knowhow

The research has helped to reveal the wealth of knowledge, skills, techniques, experience and knowhow that CVOs have amassed in relation to SFD. This is an important yet invisible resource. The development of routines and effective ways of working makes SFD a success for these organisations.

One important area of knowledge is the ability to navigate the complex regulatory landscape that applies in the field of food and eating. Here a worker in a housing-related CVO shows how they consider the food source and the health and safety of community members who received the food:

“It’s the regulations. I mean for me lifting anywhere there’s always those regulations in place in regards to what food you can take, how you freeze it, how you store it, whatever. And people felt that if they came up to me and said, well, look, listen, you know - we’ve a restaurant downtown and we’ve got 20 dinners left over. At the end of the day, you know it’s taking those on, and you have no source of the food really and how it was cooked. We have to look at allergens here, you know. I mean, at the end of the day all of those things is important. So, it’s not just a point of just taking every donation.”

(Justin, HO2)

In the process of photo-elicitation, Margaret provided a picture of a meal (Photo 7) that had been prepared for children attending a community childcare centre using FoodCloud sourced food. She explained the logistical processes and food safety practices involved in handling surplus food before it becomes a meal for children's consumption:



Photo 7 Roast dinner (Margaret, CC1)

“That was a dinner that was cooked mostly from the food that we got from the FoodCloud, you know. ... we had got three or four roast of lamb so, we were able to freeze them ... So, you can do a roast dinner for that then over a number of weeks ...

Now we have a freezer here, so we have, and like that now we're also inspected by the HSE, so they check that we have all our temperatures, you know, for freezing food and when we thaw it and all of that. So, you have to follow those guidelines as well. ... We have a trained chef with us and she's you know HACCP trained as well.”

(Margaret, CC1)

Types of food

The operation of SFD inevitably involves a huge diversity of food types, from bread to Easter eggs. It can also involve non-food items such as fresh flowers. The challenges and potential of some of these food types emerged in participants' accounts of their everyday routines and practices of SFD. In some cases, what they might have experienced as 'problematic' types of food were turned into opportunities.

Bread

We know that, globally, bread is one of the most 'wasted' categories of food. So, it was not surprising that the topic of bread, in terms of a challenge, features in almost all interviewees' accounts.

Alison (AS1) spoke of her organisation being 'breaded out' and needing to draw the line with their retailer. They now 'collect bread maybe two nights and then not collect it for a night or two again'.

For many CVOs, bread takes up large amounts of storage or freezer space and needs to be moved quickly, or else it once again becomes waste:

“Both [branches of Retailer A] this morning just had bread and I just haven’t got the room and I need to use what I have first, you know. There’s just no point in packing up the freezers and finding 2020 bread at the bottom of them, you know. We try to keep our stock rolling and all that. And you know I’d rather leave room for beef or chicken or the good stuff than the pan of bread that will fill my brown bin at the end of the week.”
(Sara, HO1)

For Phelim, getting a ‘preponderance of bread’ was their biggest challenge with surplus food donations. He expressed how his meals-on-wheels service did all they could to handle it:

“Now there is only so much bread-and-butter pudding that we can put out, or we tried to make spaghetti with breadcrumbs. There’s an Italian recipe with breadcrumbs that didn’t really work for us. A lot of our customers are elderly, and you know they don’t want to eat, you know something ... with their fingers. So, but we found that there’s way too much bread. Now when we mention it to the shops, you know the bread level falls for us. But it creeps back up then because the shops they can’t get rid of it. That’s the issue.”
(Phelim, MoW1)

For Eamonn, (DS2), the abundance of frozen bread was problematic as he explained with reference to his photo (Photo 8):

“Look at the two baskets they’re full of bread basically ... The trolley on the left full of bread from top to bottom. Everything from burger buns to white slice pan to rolls. ... 90% of yesterday’s was bread which is an overload for us.”



Photo 8 Trolleys of surplus bread (Eamonn, DS2)

“We have two fine big freezers but we have to prioritise. If we get meat products in, they’re obviously more valuable than the bread. So, the bread comes out and goes into our cold room ... The proteins are of more benefit to families and what we use it for here. And what I will say to you if eventually it’s not used, you’ll smile about this, it ends up in an organic chicken farm locally, the bread.”
(Eamonn, DS2)

Often, if a CVO does not have access to adequate storage for surplus bread, or ways to process it, it does have a value for them:

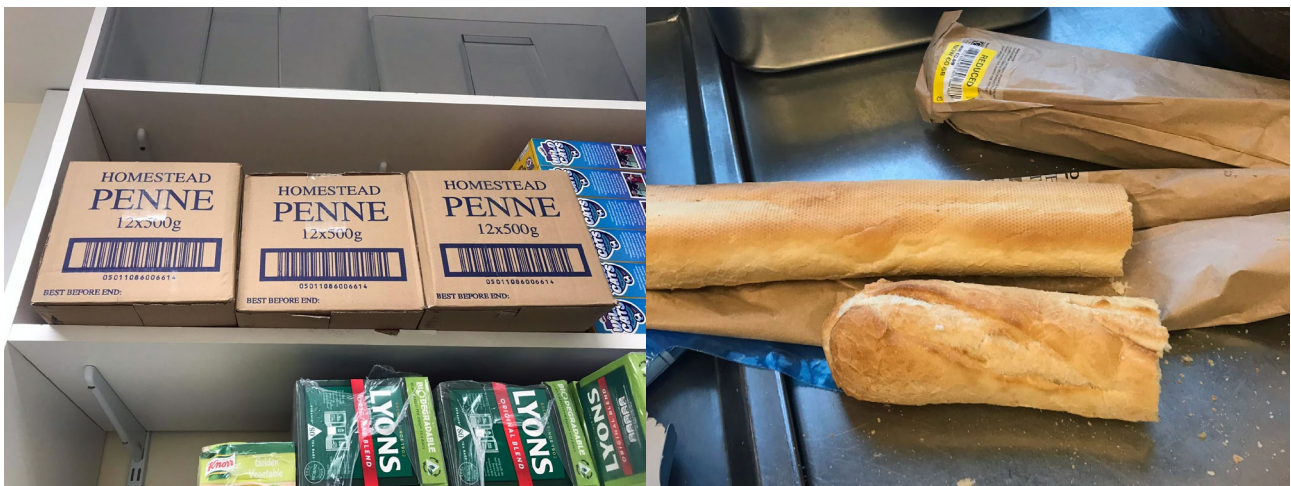
“If you get it at eight, and bread and stuff, and nobody wants to sit down at 8:00 o’clock [pm] and have like you know it. It’s very late in the evening and we didn’t have enough time to turn it around. So, we opted out of that because it was an awful lot of work, and we weren’t seeing any benefits from receiving the food. If we had a production kitchen, it might have been different. We might have been able to use that food and convert into something else. But we were just passing it on to people and the people wouldn’t come into us till the next day. So, we weren’t able to use the food.”

(Julie, FB3)

“Sometimes they’re giving you bread, and its use-by date is yesterday, and you’ve got 56 loaves of bread, you know you can’t use that. You end up feeding it to the birds.”

(Feargal, FB1)

Where many CVOs remarked on the over-abundance of bread, those with onsite catering facilities described how they turned the challenge of bread into an opportunity. Although Marie (YS2) had spoken about receiving large volumes of surplus bread, she described through her photos (Photos 9a & 9b) how her CVO used this as an opportunity to make garlic bread to go along with the pasta received through the FEAD programme:



Photos 9a & 9b Pasta and garlic bread (Marie, YS2)

“We were getting donations there and yeah, and then with the other - the FEAD, the pasta ... I was like OK yeah kids love the garlic bread, and they love their pasta so we can combine both of them and the only costs we have is the actual making of the garlic butter. But again, the staff gets to learn how to make the homemade garlic butter.”

(Marie, YS2)

Surplus bread was added to food parcels, used for toast in youth centres, and at one FRC, the challenge of too much bread led to the establishment of a pop-up pantry:

“The bread takes a lot of space. We didn’t have that space you know initially. That’s where the pop-up pantry came in. That started off. But then we got an extra freezer. And that we were able maybe to freeze those breads, you know that we weren’t as stuck. But because we were collecting more food, you know we continued with the pop-up.”

(Jane, FR3)

When they could not move bread on to other people, or include it in meals or food parcels, other CVOs still spoke of their reluctance to waste bread and moved it on to chickens or other animals as described by Noelle through her photo (Photo 10).

Although Phelim was critical of the abundance of bread and saw a need for the problem to be dealt with at the supply end, he developed a relationship with a chicken farmer to try to move the surplus on:



Photo 10 Chickens in the circular economy (Noelle, CoMC1)

“We said, look, you know we have some bread here. Would you be interested in taking it? And he’s organic. And he said, look, I would, I’ll take it, maybe you know, kind of couple of baskets ... so we’re getting rid of it that way.”

(Phelim, MoW1)

Culturally appropriate food

Some interviewees reflected on the challenges of distributing surplus food that was deemed to be culturally inappropriate. For example, the FEAD programme food was seen by involved CVOs to be useful to supply staple items such as tea, sugar, pasta and cereal. But for recipients who used rice as a staple ingredient, that supplied through FEAD was inappropriate:

“A lot of people from African countries, they don’t want pasta or pasta sauce. They want rice. But the rice that we were providing, nobody liked cooking with it. So even the best cooks that were coming in were like this rice is terrible. And we would have gone back to the Department of Social Protection - ‘cause they’re the ones that administer the programme - and said, can we change the rice? ... it was more like a pudding rice, you know.”

(Julie, FB3)

For Noelle, the distribution of surplus food could be challenging when trying to accommodate the needs of different cultural groups and gave rise to her concerns about generating food waste:

“We know a lot of the Irish people don’t eat fish and the Eastern European people do. So, we try and divert that, but it’s very difficult to tailor each bag. You know, we have to say look unfortunately we have to give you what we can, and you decide. So, they may have waste as a result.”

(Noelle, CoMC1)

On the other hand, the diversity within community user groups meant that providers could respond in a variety of ways, with food that was available. Thus Sara, who worked in a homelessness organisation, was able to open new pathways, based on community connection:

“In the last two months, I have a new client in and she just eats Halal. She’s a lovely Muslim woman, so I went and spoke to my local butchers and they were absolutely amazing they offered me some donations, they said Oh, my goodness, you know we like to help people in our community ... and I walked away with three legs of lamb ... because they said in their religion, you know when they do the slaughter, a certain percentage of it has to be given to people to bring them some good karma - so they were amazing.”

(Sara HO1)

Nutritional quality

Earlier we have seen how CVOs experienced and dealt with surplus bread. Bread, though it has benefits, is generally considered by CVOs to have low nutritional value. They would prefer food with higher nutritional value, in particular sources of protein. CVOs reflected on the nutritional value of surplus food donations and of the challenge of trying to supply food of good nutritional quality. For Julie, who worked with a foodbank, there were concerns about the nutritional value of items they were sometimes offered, such as instant noodles and sugar-sweetened flavoured milk drinks:

“I had to turn around and say no, we’re not taking that anymore. Because like that, I think it had something like there was a tiny little cartoon now had something like five spoons of sugar in it. So, it’s just sugar and the kids were loving it. And like that people were wanting crates of it.”

(Julie, FB3)

“It’s quality probably. When I said quality, I’m talking about if you get a delivery and there’s rice in it or there’s pasta in it, you’re going ‘happy days’. But if you get a delivery and there’s nutri-bars in it and jars of a - oh God! - what did we get one time? I think it

was like barbeque sauce from McDonald's or something ... you know, the little packages that they use."

(Fred, FB2)

"It can be an issue because I suppose we basically look for, you know, carbs and vegetables, and say, some sort of meat or fish or whatever. So that can be a bit tricky because obviously lots of projects are looking for meat and meat is a scarce commodity and I suppose a more valuable commodity. So that can be tricky sometimes."

(Alice, FR2)

Yet, for other CVOs, some foods considered as 'junk' or nutritionally suspect by others provided opportunities in their organisations. Chocolate, sweets, cakes and fizzy drinks were used for celebrations, prizes and during outdoor activities, or to brighten up the lives of community members. This reminds us that food is not just about nutrients; it can also be about fun and pleasure and a way to mark significant events.

Peter explained through his photos (Photos 11a & 11b) how his CVO uses such food:



Photos 11a & 11b Treats (Peter, MH1)

"I don't know whether there's a little demon going around [placename] opening crisp packets. But we seem to benefit from that. So, we had a little bit of a party celebration for we did a sponsored walk in September, so we were just doing a little thank you for our walkers. So, we put out crisps and you'll probably see there was some chocolate bars as well!"

(Peter, MH1)

For Noelle, foods such as birthday cakes and pizzas were used to brighten up everyday life, particularly for children:

“Another nice thing is that we often get from [Retailer C] as well as [Retailer D] is celebration cakes, a nice big birthday cake or a kid’s cake or a Christmas cake. And I know we’ve some bags go to people in direct provision. And there was a little boy who’d never ever had a birthday cake and he was just over the moon. But his favourite was always pizza, so when they were collecting, we would always try and get him the pizza as well.”

(Noelle, CoMC1)

Non-food items

CVOs surplus food distribution work also extended to non-food items. Non-food items such as flowers, seeds, hygiene products, toys and games were valued by CVOs. Through his photo of a sunflower grown by members who attended the CVO (Photo 12), Peter explained the added value of receiving donations of seeds from his FoodCloud retailer:

We’ve got two gardening groups and we have a cooking group, so you’ve three days in the week there’s involvement specifically in food, growing and cooking it. ... if there’s stuff comes and it needs to be recycled or put in the compost so you’re still using it, you know, and then seed too.

“Now the ladies have used the sunflower seeds, that’s why I put that up. ... they did grow a sunflower, and they did a little competition, and they had a prize for who grew the biggest sunflower. That was interesting ‘cause the girls were coming in, trying to move their sunflowers to get more sunlight and all that. It was comical, but it was enjoyable as well. You get people interested in growing things and enjoying it, and you do get a kick out of growing your own.”

(Peter, MH1)



Photo 12 Sunflowers from donated seed (Peter, MH1)

Dearbhla provided a photo of some flowers received through her CVO’s surplus food donation. She outlined the benefits in the day centre where older people meet for lunch:

"I mean, there's flowers obviously, that we use in our day centre - put them up around. That is good actually, they're beautiful. I don't know, I don't even look at the dates on them 'cause to me flowers are flowers and if they look good, it's good."

(Dearbhla, OP1)

Although the range of non-food items could sometimes stray into the 'unusual' category, CVOs generally found them to be beneficial:

"I've had some odd things like they gave me lots of dog poo bags once and whatnot, but these hurleys were great because again I kept them until nearer Christmas and I added them to the activity packs and food parcels and they went down a treat obviously, you know, because the kids really felt like they were personally getting something from it."

(Ellen, FR1)

"Now we get a variety, you can imagine you can get donated all sorts of stuff. Toothbrushes and you know. And sometimes if they've got kids with them, we'll give the kids, we'll put sweets in, we'll put biscuits in. You know we'll give them whatever we've got. Toys, sometimes we get toys donated to us at Christmas and we give them toys and we get flowers. There'll be a bunch of flowers."

(Feargal, FB1)

"We would have got flowers. We get them from time to time and we just brighten up the centre with the flowers, it's lovely. We've got sun creams which were fantastic because ... the heat can be unreal and kids might not be coming, or the leaders haven't you know been thinking of - oh God, yeah, we need like 15 bottles of sun cream we've 30 kids with us, you know?"

(Marie, YS2)

Relationships with retailers

In signing up as a FoodCloud community partner, CVOs, through the FoodCloud app, are placed in contact with a local retailer who provides them with surplus food. This arrangement can generate challenges for CVOs. A dominant theme identified in CVOs' accounts of their experiences with SFD relates to how they manage their relationships with retailers. This can relate to 'how' they receive the food and the 'type of food', as well as the extent to which retailers understand the 'value' in the work of SFD through FoodCloud.

Understanding needs

CVOs emphasised the importance of having a good relationship with retailers and of the retailers understanding their needs. In some cases, retailers lacked a full understanding of what the CVO does with the surplus food. Challenging issues included those related to receiving food not fit for human consumption, needing to be disposed of and so adding to CVOs' food waste costs, and donation of perishables that were past their use-by-date:

"Like you know they didn't have an understanding, or they just didn't have the willingness to understand what we did ... they were giving us their food. It's already spoiled and moulded and throwing it to us and I'm like but that's not what the initiative is about."

(Jane, FR3)

"It's crazy stuff that we're kind of getting like and I'm there going I don't think they understand what FoodCloud is. Because when I go in there it drives me mad because they will have food here even though it's cat food, dog food, water or whatever. You know it's very poor, but then there's a big blue bin full of fruit, breads the whole lot in there. And I'm there going - what are they doing with this food?"

(Sonia, YS1)

Aisling, whose service for older people concentrates on meals-on-wheels, now receives food through a FoodCloud hub. Her prior experience using the retail service revealed the challenge of receiving food that was of no use to them:

"Collecting food from the shop, I suppose maybe didn't really suit us because of the food that was provided just didn't suit our service you know. I've absolutely no problem with the service itself. Just didn't suit us. ... It was just the wrong products, and we would never have used them so, there was no point. The whole idea is to prevent food waste. It would have just passed on the problem as in we would have been getting rid of it rather than the shop getting rid of it."

(Aisling, OP4)

For Dearbhla, receiving food that was not suitable for use in her older people's service generated internal organisational difficulties. Her catering staff considered it disrespectful to receive fruit that was mouldy and this added to their food waste as she explained through her photo (Photo 13):



Photo 13 Inedible donated food (Dearbhla, OP1)

Now we're going to have to incur the cost of dumping it. So, to me I think it devalues our services because you know, would you eat that? No, you wouldn't. So why expect an elderly person to eat it? And that's why the kitchen were getting upset – 'how dare they give us this, it's so disrespectful'

(Dearbhla, OP1)

Dearbhla went on to provide an analysis of the situation she had described. She reflected that the volunteer who picked up the food did not communicate with the retailer about the inappropriateness of the food. If a staff member had done so they would have expressed their views.

Phelim, too, emphasised the importance of letting the retailer know their needs but highlighted that staff changeovers in the supermarket can make it difficult with follow-through:

"We can get the message through to the individual we're dealing with. Right, but on the night if she has packed all the stuff and it's ready for collection, there is no debate. You take what you're given you can't say to her we don't want that, take that out. It's not like that. There's stacked crates ... we've an allotted time to arrive. Between 8 and 9 every evening, and when the driver arrives, she just says – there's your lot and you just load it. When he has it loaded, they might say ... there's an awful lot of bread in that like you know. She says, OK, I'll look after that. But then she's not on dispatch the following night or the following day."

(Phelim, MoW1)

Other CVOs were keen to point out that they had positive relationships with retailers. Understanding the needs of retailers and CVOs developed over time through conversations and through existing connections in supermarkets:

"Knowing the staff in [Retailer B] pretty well now in the years I've been going, and being able to say to them, we will use this stuff don't throw it away, we will use it. We will find a way of using it. Don't get rid of it. You know? And we've had plant pots and everything off them that have been damaged you know. Don't throw that away we'll use that there. Even if it's damaged we can still use the plant pot. You mightn't be able to sell that, but we'll be able to use it. Yeah, so it's been great that way."

(Peter, MH1)

“There was a high demand for people looking for food, but we can only do what we could do, whatever we’re getting from FoodCloud. I suppose for me, I built up a good relationship with [Retailer C]. So, like since we have started this good relationship, I got to know staff and I explained what we were doing.”

(Sonia, YS1)

Making and keeping connections

For all CVOs, SFD involves making connections with people through food and the maintenance of those connections. During the pandemic the importance of social connection through food was heightened. Food functioned as ‘a conversation starter’ and provided the opportunity to CVOs to identify unmet needs in their communities.

Keeping people connected

We have seen earlier how CVOs that previously provided onsite meal services and other services pivoted to meal delivery services. It was important for CVOs to maintain their connections with community members. While those who previously provided meals-on-wheels continued to do so, they were also able to use the food delivery service to provide further support to those required to cocoon during the early months of the pandemic. For Dearbhla (OP1), the meals and wheels service is ‘not just a meal’ and during the pandemic volunteers went beyond the usual chat at the door to helping people with other services that they could not reach:

“We also started doing pension collections for people, shopping, even the newspaper. You know that some people weren’t able to get out for their morning paper. So, all those things we were able to do for the person and actually it brought in a huge amount of new volunteers.”

(Dearbhla, OP1)

CVOs that operated a delivery service sometimes found the food to be incidental and that the opportunity to check in on people was a benefit. In the early days of the pandemic, phone or WhatsApp communication was central to maintaining communication with community members. The offer of a food parcel provided another opportunity for workers like Peter to keep in-person, albeit socially distanced, connection with community members:

“Part of our services during the pandemic was all phone calls. So, we were ringing people, then you were talking to them asking them how they were getting on – ‘Oh I’m afraid to go to the shop’, ‘I’m afraid to do this and afraid to do that’ and we would go ‘Well look - We have food here that [retailer C]’s given us. What type of things would you be interested in?’ Or tell them what we had, and they’d go – ‘Oh yes bring it up.’ So, then

I would drop it at their front door. Knock at the door, step away and let them come and take the food."

(Peter, MH1)

Aisling's CVO moved during the pandemic from a day centre meal service to a meals-on-wheels service. This 'pivot' was initially motivated by the need to provide food to their day service users. But it became apparent that the service was viewed more broadly as an important mechanism for social interaction for those confined to their homes:

"I just actually had a text from the son of a woman that lives on her own ... she was getting meals from us three days a week. He said she needs a bit more social contact now - can I get the meals five days a week? ... It's as much about the social aspect as the meal. ... like I get a phone call, our delivery driver goes out and maybe an hour later, I get a phone call from someone saying, well, my dinner isn't here yet. They look forward to it ... if the delivery is late, they panic because it's such a, reliable, is the word. They know the bus driver will be there at such a time on such a day and if he's not there they're on the phone to me going - what's gone wrong you know. So, they do depend on it."

(Aisling, OP4)

Food: A conversation starter

'Food can be a great conversation starter' (Peter, MH1). SFD may provide opportunities for engagement with people who may be lonely or disconnected socially:

"We have certain people who come into us that we know they're not just coming in for the food, [but for] conversation, companionship to have a chat and get some flowers to take back and just it can be lonely and that's the reality."

(Feargal, FB1)

"The food is a huge importance for them because again the boredom and because it's something to open a conversation up with. I mean 50% of the clients will ask at least one of us around the kitchen area everyday 'What's for lunch' You know 'how are you today? I'm good'. And 'how are you today?' And it nearly opens up the conversation, you know."

(Sara, HO1)

"And the other thing was I'd leave a plate beside him and he'd no obligation to eat it or anything. Then he'd eat it away and next thing he started talking and now he's one of the top guys in the [organisation] ... through food and through conversation ... a total transformation from being a guy who didn't engage at all to being a guy who you can't keep him away from the [organisation]."

(Matt, OP3)

“Like you see today, it’s very busy and kids are all being collected at the same time, more or less and people are just coming running, collecting the kids. They might pick something up so the connection is quite small when it’s busy, but it does give you an opportunity, I suppose, sometimes to talk to people or to talk to parents you know, and I think parents, if you ask them, would probably say that they’re very satisfied with the openness of the availability of food.”

(Alice, FR2)

CVOs that provided residential services also found that food parcels worked to maintain connection when community members moved on from their service:

“When they move on, and that bond is still there, we still give them a food parcel or whatever. So, you still have that bond. You still have a phone call or whatever, and they still feel as if, they’re out there on their own but there’s some safety blanket there too.”

(Justin, HO2)

Identification of unmet needs

While food worked to open conversations with people, it also, particularly during the pandemic, highlighted or surfaced unmet needs in the community:

“It’s interesting too, the people that come in. I get talking to them and they’re like, am I supposed to be here? I’m like, of course, you’re supposed to be here. Why not? Why are you supposed to be not here? You do get a little insight, you know. And it’s funny when people come in and you say you can be here it’s no problem. They do open up and then I get to know who genuinely is in need.”

(Emily, FR3)

“The pandemic itself – no, of course, overall you can’t say there’s anything positive – but this gave me time to make different connections and new connections and see the need. That is, you know, it’s like if you scratched the surface what’s underneath, you know, yeah, and that’s what we began to see.”

(Ellen, FR1)

“There were a few people in from the entertainment business because it wouldn’t necessarily have allowed them go for social welfare payments, because a lot of that money would have been cash-in-hand and that sort of thing. And then when all the gigs stopped ... they absolutely had nothing, you know, if they hadn’t put anything aside. But a lot of people live hand-to-mouth. So, we do a lot of those type of people, a lot of people with small children, who like that wouldn’t have had the nest egg or anything

to fall back on and would have it gone in on a Monday, told to come back Tuesday and then would have had to wait for Social Welfare. And that was the problem. Like there was a slowness in the payment to social welfare, so they literally hadn't anything. So, they were very, very happy to use the food bank."

(Sandra, FB4)

Although CVOs reported positively about connecting to people through food delivery services, such actions were not universally welcomed, as Eamonn explained:

"[We had] nearly 90 members we visited once a week. Everybody got some little food item. Some weeks we would have, could be a couple of loaves of bread, little bit of frozen meat, maybe a bit of frozen fish, and occasionally a bit of fruit. But everybody got some little thing. But it was an excuse to go out and meet people. Some people we had to be careful how we approached them. Would they take offense to the fact that we were coming?"

In rural Ireland it's, some people ... took offense, but didn't rebut us for coming with it. But no, 'we're fine, give it to somebody else that might need it.' ... But 99% of people loved the idea that they were getting ... it saved them during lockdown ... trying to organise a bit of shopping as well."

(Eamonn, DS2)

Adding value to surplus food

In their accounts of food service provision, CVOs spoke about other opportunities afforded them by surplus food donations. They explained how they added value to surplus food through a range of mechanisms that included alternative networks for redistribution, raising awareness of the value in SFD through educational activities such as shopping and cooking, and other creative practices.

Alternative networks for redistribution

We have noted earlier that CVOs occasionally receive large volumes of food that has to be moved quickly or a product that they already have in large supply or cannot store. CVOs are not simply standalone distributors of SFD but often have their own alternative networks for redistribution.

Underpinning this movement to alternative networks is a strong desire to not waste food. As Feargal explains of his foodbank:

"We found a home for them somewhere because one of the strengths of our little foodbank is that, like I said, we're all Indians and we're all chiefs when it needs to be."

Everyone's got their own little network of who can use it - of who can take this and who can take that. And where they can get stuff from you know, everybody who volunteers here doesn't just come in and do the physical activities of packing and picking stuff up. There's a little bit of outside networking going on for everybody in their own little field. So, when we got that food in people were able to, you know, catering packs of whatever ... some organisation in the county or some football club or somebody could've used it. So, it was given to people who could make use of it. Nothing, nothing has gone to waste."

(Feargal, FB1)

Justin too, also has a potential problem with generation of food waste and must grapple with too much food. Like Feargal, he moves it on through his other networks:

"Waste is a problem for me, I mean even sometimes we get so much ... [but] there are families here in difficulties and because I work for [name of organisation] ... there's a responsibility too, there's a side where I would turn around if I have a load of ambient goods and there's a good date on it or whatever. And if I can give that out to the community or some other organisations that can use that, then I've no problem doing that. So, I'll do that before there's any waste at all. Yeah, there's that sort of chain where you can. We've had our fill let's give it to somebody else and work away like that and that's the way to do it."

(Justin, HO2)

Raising awareness of the value in surplus food

Some CVOS spoke about how their use of surplus food and openness about it, as expressed, for example, through open-access policies, had the ripple effect of raising awareness about food waste and the value inherent in surplus food:

"If [people] see the table or anything like that, they're kind of like are we just allowed to take it? And our thing is like well, if you don't take it, it's going to go to waste. It's perfectly good food and that kind of makes people feel better about taking it."

(Maura, DS1)

"But their awareness is raising as well ... going 'Oh my God like this would have been going in a skip this food' you know yeah, they constantly comment."

(Marie, YS2)

"Our pop-up pantry ... is making our community more aware of the waste that is coming from supermarkets as well you know. We get people coming and saying - They were actually going to throw this out? And you're going yeah, so it is getting people aware. Slowly, but it's getting there."

(Jane, FR3)

Some CVOs' surplus food donations were used in educational activities and to enhance life skills. In the case of Eamonn's CVO that worked with young people with disabilities, life skills training with surplus food donations involved young people in the collection of food at the supermarket. Following this they planned and executed a meal with the food and celebrated through a 'Come Dine with Me' event:

"We're trying to teach them life skills basically. ... They have their good days and their bad days. But just to check them out to see what real life is like and arrive back to [Retailer A]. And I stood back and just let them inquire themselves. We're here to collect the food donation blah blah blah and let them at it, you know. And so, they've seen it through from start to finish. ... to go there, collect the products, unload them out of the trolley into our baskets in the van. In the minibus back to the centre, load them into the freezer and then to use products. It's a big thing to them, like you know, before this they just presume look, it's in the freezer. We'll cook it you know [...] we're very lucky we have a group of four or five who work with the school leavers all the time like and some of the ideas they come up with are just incredible. You know this 'Come Dine with Me' is just the tip of the iceberg."

(Eamonn, DS2)

Sara explained that although her CVO was centrally involved in onsite food provision to people with housing difficulties, they also used the surplus food in cooking activities and to demonstrate how to budget when moving on from supported accommodation. Referring to her photo of a bowl of creamed rice and stewed apple (Photo 14) she spoke of how she relayed information and experience about food so that it was meaningful for those who may have health issues as a result of addiction:

"You're passing on, you know, life skills ... We don't all have them, but we all need them ... I've done my demo every week. Every main ingredient whether it be the mince, the cooking apples that we made tarts with, the creamed rice pudding that I made for them with the stewed apple."

So that was a bag of creamed rice from [Retailer B] or [Retailer A] ... it was just a home cooked something that I wanted to show the guys: if you don't feel that well even if you made a little bit of creamed rice and cooked it and cooled it and put it in your fridge for a couple of days. You have a something basic in your tummy. If you're not able to make a pot of soup or make a little bit of stew, or you know."

So they went mad for it! They thought it was the nicest thing they'd ever tasted. One of them got upset but in a nice way. He said 'you've just reminded me of my mum. That was the one thing as a child my mum always cooked that for us'. So, you're drawing on their ability to relate food with good things in their lives as well, and you're teaching them a wee skill of how to have something sturdy in the tummy when the tummies aren't great - because of their history of drug abuse and alcohol and stuff, the stomachs aren't wonderful."

(Sara, HO1)



Photo 14 Cooking for life skills (Sara, HO1)

Another CVO that worked with young people with disabilities also spoke about the unexpected opportunities provided by, for example, bulk supplies of pasta and rice:

"Today we got these big, huge bags of pasta and rice - I'm like, oh my God, what are we going to do with this? And we started using it for sensory play in our social group. The kids were taking it and they were like dying the pasta and they were making sensory boxes and stuff. We [find a] use for everything that's been given to us."

(Maura, DS1)

Creative practices

Maura's story of the pasta and rice is just one example of the creativity that is applied within CVOs when dealing with surplus food. There were many other activities described by participants, especially when dealing with unexpected quantities or types of food, or unanticipated situations.

As Justin remarked:

"If you don't have that sort of streak of creativity, you ... I mean it's going to become what it is, it is what it is - its waste."

(Justin, HO2)

While some CVOs can be hampered by the lack of predictability in supply and variety, Phelim saw this as an opportunity:

"Because it forces people to rethink, it's like you know what can I do with this? So, like the avocado cake."

(Phelim, MoW1)

Creativity was often facilitated by access to cooking facilities and skilled staff. Dearbhla reflected that over time catering staff adapt and find ways to add value to foods that were not part of their usual fare:

“Sweet potatoes, for instance, we got an awful lot of them. My God, there was abundance of them. But the chefs said “that’s fine I’ll use them for soups”. You know they are very good in what they can do.”

(Dearbhla, OP1)

Both Peter and Sara showed how they were open to change and had the flexibility and creativity to manoeuvre the food plan to accommodate irregular items:

“There were the gherkins and there were also sun-dried tomatoes. So, I have the menu done for next week. I try and do the menu two weeks in advance. So literally crostini will go on the lunch menu instead of what I had down.”

(Sara, HO1)

“Thinking about what you can do with these things and what’s available to us. ... some of them have done cakes and used some little oranges. They put them all over ... with segments of, you know, satsuma oranges on top. ... they had some inside and they used them to do like a desert rather than just going – there’s some oranges. ... Actually, it was quite tasty ... it gets more people involved in stuff then and using their imagination.”

(Peter, MH1)

In a previous section we have shown how large volumes of surplus bread presents CVOs with distribution challenges and how, on occasion, unusable bread is fed to animals. For one CVO that operated a foodbank, a creative solution to the challenge of surplus bread led to the set-up of a community pantry that, unlike the foodbank, was open to everyone:

“They come in and take the food that has already been donated by FoodCloud on the Monday night. So, we give it out on the Tuesday, so it’s not wasted. As our food bank doesn’t open till the Thursday. So, the food is there from Monday night. So, we give it out on the Tuesday. So, it’s not going to waste.”

(Jane, FR3)

Economic aspects

Involvement by CVOs in SFD has the potential to expose them to additional costs, for example for transport, facilities, or ongoing consumables. On the other hand, access to food for no or low cost

can help to support CVOs financially and allow them to engage in activities that would otherwise be beyond their financial capacity – particularly smaller organisations without core funding.

Costs

We have stressed in this report that SFD fundamentally involves the *movement* of food. This is effortful and not without associated costs. Fred’s organisation, for example, found that on occasion the costs of transporting surplus food outweighed the benefits:

“For us there was a cost on getting the food transported up, you know? And it was a cost per pallet ... we were paying through FoodCloud I think €166 a month, you know, and then you were getting a value of food. But the local transport company was about €30 a pallet to get it brought up the road. And one week we got two pallets of crisps ... and what a waste, we would have been better to go down to the local shop and buy something there.”

(Fred, FB2)

While the food provided via FoodCloud might be low-cost or free, there are other infrastructural costs that CVOs must consider. These can be prohibitive and constrain the type of service that can be offered:

“We were doing the two food banks and it was great ... but the idea is ... to have set up a social grocery. But we were really restricted because we didn’t have a premises. There’s no funding available through the government to help. The only aid we get is the actual food. So, we have been looking for a premises for a number of years and even stuff like fridges, freezers. The basics to equip, you know, to be able to take in the food. You know it all costs a huge amount of money so very restricted. So, we’re concentrating on the FEAD program and the non-perishables because we don’t have the fridges freezers. It’s working really well, but ... we’re not meeting the needs of the people that we work with.”

(Julie, FB3)

Major pieces of necessary equipment like fridges, freezers and forklifts are costly for CVOs to acquire:

“We weren’t able to purchase a forklift, so we used to hire a forklift for one week out of every month. If our transport company weren’t able to collect on that week, that meant that we would have to extend the agreement into the next week. So, it would bump up our costs and you’d have to rejig staff as well.”

Yeah, to physically move the pallets off the truck, into the warehouse and then up onto the racking. So, the forklift was a huge issue, especially when the pandemic hit because the volume of food coming into the warehouse increased ... And all the staff here were saying we cannot cope with just having a forklift for one week. You know, it's physically going to, you know, their backs were sore and stuff."

(Julie, FB3)

"Our larger van came donated from [Retailer C] but the upkeep of that is huge. You know, to keep the van on the road and the maintenance and everything. So, there's huge costs associated with that."

(Julie, FB3)

Ongoing costs like insurance and consumables are also significant, and not necessarily funded by any external body:

"Our costs are quite low for the volume of food that we handle and the amount of people that we look after. But I think the warehouse and staff and the vans, and the insurance is about €120,000 per year. And we don't get any help from the government with this. So, we have to fundraise those costs ourselves."

(Julie, FB3)

"Even little things like the black plastic bags that we pack the food into. That is costing us approximately €8000 per year on black plastic bags."

(Julie, FB3)

Benefits

Access to surplus food can reduce costs for CVOs. This was particularly important during the Covid-19 pandemic as many traditional or established fundraising activities were curtailed or cancelled. At the same time, as we have seen, demands on services may have increased.

"I suppose the big thing for us last year was the loss of our fund-raising activity ... we would depend hugely on things like church gate collections and ... every year we'd have a big open day here. And it's a big money maker for our organisation, and we would have had a Christmas fair and a number of other things in between. ... we would have lost a good bit of our financial revenue last year."

(Alison, AS1)

“When we went into lockdown last year, all of our fund-raising activity ceased. So, we were faced with closure. We had to put an appeal out on radio and TV to say that we had enough money to keep going until maybe the end of April beginning of May and after that then it was like OK, well we might have to close because we don’t have the funding to keep this going. And we had no support from the government.”

(Julie, FB3)

Even when there is a cost to CVOs of involvement with FoodCloud, this is seen as good value for money:

“I think for what we get it’s costing us very little for what we get. And what we are able to offer to the community. ... it’s costing us very little but the impact on the families is huge.”

(Jane, FR3)

“Before that we were just buying in all our stock. ... the plans for the café was that we would employ local people, people attached to the club, people with autism and at the same time all the profits then will be going back into club. ... we were paying massive amounts of money for stock and things like that.”

(Maura, DS1)

The money saved through access to surplus food may not always make a huge difference, but remains of significance to CVOs:

“It’s been quite helpful obviously with a lot of my stuff being based around the garden and groups and things so it’s benefitted me that we can access the food. That we can use it to build for the future kind of thing. ... it’s made a slight difference not a massive difference, but a slight difference in the fact that we maybe don’t use as much petty cash during the food activities and stuff like that.”

(Peter, MH1)

“The centre has the overall budget and whatever amount they put away for the catering and household. Obviously if I’m not having to use some of that up but then there’s times where my budget goes way over.”

(Marie, YS2)

Overall, we can say that SFD has significant cost-saving potential for CVOs, but also brings with it exposure to additional capital and running costs that need to be recognised.

Conclusion

This chapter has described how a sample of CVOs operated their food provision service prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 and up to December 2021. Twenty-two key informants from CVOs that represented the main organisation types partnered with FoodCloud participated in a semi-structured interview using the photo-elicitation method. Commenting on their photos, and through further discussion, they described how they operated their service during this period and the challenges and opportunities they experienced related to the pandemic specifically, and, more broadly, their SFD work.

In terms of the impact of Covid-19 on CVOs' operations, all experienced new demands from people who had never previously accessed food assistance, for example, those dependent on formal and informal income with organisations that had closed, those who worked in the entertainment industry, construction, and older people who could not leave their houses as they were advised to cocoon. The closure of restaurants and other food businesses also brought new supplies of food that presented both challenges and opportunities for CVOs.

CVOs found that they needed to find new ways to operate. Many pivoted to food parcel delivery. There were also changed arrangements to keep everyone safe and with packing and bagging of food. New ways of operating curtailed the social interaction that had been central to their work.

The theme 'labour and logistics' went to the heart of what it means to 'do' SFD in a CVO. With or without a pandemic, the work of SFD involves volunteers and employees; physical labour; emotional labour and empathy; organisational and managerial capacities; knowledge skills, techniques, experience and knowhow; and technology and infrastructure. All of these are accompanied by challenges and opportunities that tell us much about what works and doesn't work for CVOs in particular contexts.

The topic of food and non-food items and how these are used in CVOs' SFD operations highlights dilemmas and opportunities in terms of the surplus of bread, culturally appropriate food, nutritional quality, and non-food items. The latter could provide a welcome respite from the pressure of the pandemic, as well increasing the variety of activities that CVOs could engage in.

Relationship work with retailers is central to CVOs' work in SFD. Where the needs of both retailers and CVOs are understood, there seems to be greater potential to maximise the opportunities afforded by surplus food.

We found that CVOs added value to surplus food in various ways, all underpinned by a strong desire to not waste food. They have alternative networks for redistribution, raise awareness in their work about surplus food and engage in creative practices to add value to it.

Surplus food has economic benefits for CVOs, for some more than others. It can bring cost savings in organisations where budgets for food are very limited. Nonetheless, there is a need to recognise that the labour processes involved in SFD can expose CVOs to additional and significant costs for infrastructure and transportation.

In Chapter 5, that follows, we examine how CVOs' community members experience the receipt of surplus food.

Chapter 5: Community member perspectives

The perspectives of those who receive food from FoodCloud's community partner organisations is important to understanding how SFD impacts on their everyday lives and wellbeing. Community members also reflect on their experiences of how services are delivered.

Research Objective 5 sought to examine how community members accessed food during the Covid-19 pandemic. Within this broad objective, community members who received food from a CVO partnered with FoodCloud were asked about:

- their use of the food provided through CVO
- the impact of accessing food support in terms of health and wellness; feelings and experiences about using the service?
- the impact of Covid-19 on their daily and family life

Participant characteristics

Twelve participants who received food through CVOs partnered with FoodCloud participated in one-to-one semi-structured interviews using the photo-elicitation technique.

Table 5.1 below indicates participants' demographic characteristics and the type of food service used.

Participants ranged in age from 23 to 89 years [mean age of 51 years]. Nine participants were living in households with children, while three lived alone.

Five participants accessed food through a foodbank, three through a meals-on-wheels and day centre; two through food parcels picked up or delivered by their CVO, one a foodbank and community pantry; and one through an open access community pantry.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Income Source	Living Circumstances	Location	Type of food service	Service use pre-Covid-19
Agnes	F	89	Public service pension	Alone	Rural countryside	Meals-on-wheels & day centre	Yes
Alma	F	40	Welfare payment & partner's employment income	w/ partner & 2 children	Rural town	Foodbank	No
Ariana	F	23	Dependent on partner	w/ child & occasionally partner	Urban city	Foodbank	No
Bernadette	F	78	State pension	Alone	Rural town	Meals-on-wheels & day centre	Yes
Doireann	F	54	Welfare payment	w/ 3 adult children	Urban city	Foodbank	Yes
Evelyn	F	32	Welfare payment	w/ 4 children	Urban city	Foodbank	Yes
Keith	M	54	Welfare payment	w/ 2 children	Urban city	Food parcel from CVO	Yes
Leonard	M	42	Both parents employed	w/ partner & 3 children	Urban city	Open access at FRC	Yes
Peadar	M	80	State pension & private income	Alone	Rural town	Meals-on-wheels & day centre meals	Yes
Rachael	F	41	Welfare payment	w/ partner & 4 children	Urban town	Foodbank	Yes
Seána	F	43	Welfare & maintenance payments	w/ 4 children	Rural town	Foodbank & community pantry	Yes
Yasmine	F	37	Welfare payment	w/ partner & 4 children	Rural town	Food parcel through CVO	No

Table 5.1 Characteristics of community member interviewees

Pathway to community food support

Although there is some variation in how participants came to access food through a CVO, the influence of informal networks and information sources dominates their accounts. Six participants accessed CVO food support services after suggestions from family and/or friends, four already had a connection with the CVO for other services and two received a referral from another service.

The sample of participants lived mainly on welfare payments or a mix of welfare payments and other forms of income. One participant had recently gained professional employment and was now in a dual income family after completing educational qualifications (Leonard), another received a public service pension (Agnes) and one (Ariana) was dependent on her partner as she had no welfare entitlements.

Three participants, Alma, Ariana and Yasmine accessed food support for the first time due to the Covid-19 pandemic as depicted below:

Alma

Covid-19 disrupted employment for Alma and her partner. Both lost their jobs in catering at the onset of the pandemic and relocated to another area in Ireland where she had more support and where there was a prospect of employment.

Ariana

Ariana worked as a live-in child carer. At the onset of the pandemic, she relocated to another area of Ireland with her employer who decided to work from home during the pandemic. Ariana found the situation challenging as she could not travel due to the restrictions and was unhappy about her situation. She left her employer, returned to her previous location, and was unable to find work. Soon after she became pregnant.

Yasmine

Yasmine and her partner live on welfare payments with four children. Her fourth child was born soon after the onset of the pandemic. She was also struggling with children and home-schooling. The opportunity to avail of food parcels and cookery demonstrations through her CVO provided another outlet for her and her children as well as help with her food budget.

Key themes

The analysis of community members' interview data is presented under four themes:

- Receiving surplus food
- How surplus food is used
- Impact: more than food
- Covid-19

Each theme contains sub-themes as detailed in Table 5.2

Theme	Sub-themes
Receiving surplus food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Initial feelings ● How they make you feel: CVOs' approach
How surplus food is used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Food planning ● Adaptation and creativity ● The second food chain ● Food and cultural diversity
Impact: more than food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Financial ● Social connection ● Wellbeing
Covid-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Food frequency and variety ● Restrictions

Table 5.2 Community member interviews: themes and sub-themes

Receiving surplus food

Initial feelings

Participants were asked how they felt about receiving surplus food from their CVO. As shown earlier, most encountered their CVO through informal networks. Nevertheless, the step from finding out about the CVO's food service, to connecting with it and receiving food, has been uneasy one in the case of foodbank recipients.

Evelyn explained that her first trip to the foodbank was with her mother. She linked her by the arm, pretending to be her carer. She was fearful of being seen by people who might know her and of being perceived as failed parent. This was made even more acute as she was a lone parent.

Similarly, Alma, who came to access food support through a foodbank, felt deeply uncomfortable about doing it and of having failed:

"Well, let me tell you like this my feeling was like ashamed. Shame, I will say shame. Just like this moment when you are like 'Oh my God, what the hell is going on. Like how we how did we get here? Like from everything that we have planned?"

(Alma, Foodbank)

Feelings of embarrassment and failure were also felt by Seána who attended a Family Resource Centre foodbank and used its community pantry:

"Honestly, I was kind of I suppose it is embarrassed because you feel like you can't provide for your family. So that's when you're like, Oh my God! you know, am I that bad?"

(Seána, Foodbank)

Ariana spoke of discomfort and considered that there could be people in greater 'need' than her:

"My boyfriend's family always told about that, and they knew we were struggling a bit so they always say like 'Oh go over and get it. Go over and get it' and I never felt comfortable. I never had to like get any kind of free food or anything like that, before, not even in [country name]. So, I was a bit like ... 'no there's probably people that need more than me.' I probably don't need it but once the baby came and we were really tight, I was like no, I actually do need it."

(Ariana, Foodbank)

For participants who received meals-on-wheels and who also attended day centres (Bernadette, Peadar, Agnes), where CVOs made use of FoodCloud food in a range of ways, there were no feelings of shame or embarrassment. In contrast, they spoke enthusiastically about being able to avail of the service and, amongst other things, of the independence it afforded them.

Other participants (Leonard, Keith, Rachael, Doireann, Yasmine) did not express feelings of shame or embarrassment. They were already connected to the service where they availed of food support, albeit in varying ways, as will be described later.

How they make you feel: CVOs' approach

When asked about how they felt about using a surplus food distribution service, participants went into some detail to explain the approach of the CVOs.

Earlier, we saw how Evelyn spoke of the shame she felt on her first visit to the foodbank. She further reflected on how the approach of the staff there led to a changed perspective. For Seána, who also spoke of her reluctance to access food support, it was a matter of 'then you just have to get over yourself and go look this is helping you know'. Her anxiety was alleviated by the staff's approach and getting involved in the CVO's food sharing work

Leonard's children attend a childcare centre at a Family Resource Centre (FRC). At the FRC food is open for all:

"So, we just go in. We just grab a parcel, and we can take away. Sometimes they have a table set up with various different items we can go and choose what you'd like to take."

(Leonard, FRC)

The CVO's approach to surplus food distribution is central to his positive experience:

"I'm just so conscientious of the way it's being dealt with by the organisation that we get it from ... the dignity and respect that is shown. ... And it's all based around communication. You know the food that was offered, the way in which it is offered. It's not just offered to us, but some of the staff themselves would also – I think my child is going to like this too now, you know, because it's you know just it's something else you won't experience it everywhere. But yeah, at this particular place, the model that they've designed it on has been phenomenal to say the least."

(Leonard, FRC)

Although Alma initially felt ashamed about accessing a foodbank, she found that the foodbank's approach put her at ease:

"And then when I got there, like I'm telling you, I don't know his name. But this guy like ... he always takes this bag to my car. He's like no, no like. I'm like oh my God, you know, like so friendly. So, like I cannot explain that you just feel like you don't feel like bad that you are there. 'It's just we are here to help you girl'. You know just we have your back."

(Alma, Foodbank)

How surplus food is used

As shown earlier in Table 5.1, community members received surplus food in different ways that ranged from prepared meals on site or delivered to their home, to food parcels from a foodbank, to self-selection at a community pantry. There was also variation in the type of food received and in how participants used it, as shown in Table 5.3 below. Overall, our participants received ambient foods, or a combination of fresh and ambient foods, or a meal through meals-on-wheels service or at a day centre. In the following section we consider how participants made use of the surplus food. Their descriptions about food are delineated by sub-themes: food planning; adaptation and creativity; the informal food chain; and unfamiliar food.

Pseudonym	Organisation type	Type/nature of food received
Agnes	MoW & Day Centre	Three course meal for reheating (blast chilled); Meal at day centre
Alma	Foodbank	Wide range of supermarket produce: fruit, vegetables, cakes, ingredients; flowers, plants
Ariana	Foodbank	Ambient foods: Tinned meat, carrots in jars, tinned beans. Occasional: cleaning products, nappies.
Bernadette	MoW & Day Centre	Three course meal for reheating (blast chilled); Meal at day centre
Doireann	Foodbank	Ambient foods: Dried pasta, tea bags, cereal, tinned beans, and peas, jar tomato sauce; occasional voucher for butcher

Pseudonym	Organisation type	Type/nature of food received
Evelyn	Foodbank	Ambient foods: Dried pasta, tea bags, cereal, tinned beans and peas, jar tomato sauce
Keith	Housing	Range of supermarket produce: ready meals, biscuits, tea bags, wraps
Leonard	FRC	Range of supermarket produce: fruit, vegetables, milk, cereal, yogurts
Peadar	MoW & Day Centre	Three course meal for reheating (previously blast chilled); Meal at day centre
Rachael	Foodbank	Range of ambient and fresh foods: Tea, coffee, beans, eggs, chicken
Seána	FRC	Ambient foods: tinned beans, peas, pasta, tea bags Fresh food from community pantry: bread, herbs, cream
Yasmine	CRC	Range of fruit and veg; Occasional ambient produce: tea, sugar

Table 5.3 Type and nature of food received

Food planning

Seána spoke enthusiastically about planning how she would use the surplus food. She added fresh produce selected from the CVO's community pantry to the ambient foods in the food parcel:

“So, it would be just like oh what goodies today. And there could be anything you know. And then we write out a menu when we go home then. ... Like say today for instance there's a lot of bananas out there. So, you can cut the bananas and freeze them. So, what I could do this week with some bananas is - once bananas are frozen you can add buttermilk and make ice cream ... like different fruits in and separate them into little bags to make smoothies with some yogurt.”

(Seána, FRC)

Similarly, Leonard talks about how he builds the surplus food into his family's overall food plan and in the context of what he already has and needs to buy:

“Some of it I would see it as a nice to have. But the majority of the stuff, the way I use the facility ... is if there's something available, I take that and I scratch it off the shopping list. ... So, if the opportunity presents, I'm delighted, absolutely delighted to have that opportunity because at the end of the day, you know we've got to feed our family and we've got to be able to take care of things. And these are the opportunities that the [organisation] has provided for us.”

(Leonard, FRC)

Being able to plan and eat in a 'normal' manner is important for Alma. Having access to food that she would buy if she could afford it enables Alma to do more with the food and to plan her family's meals:

"The full bag like of everything that you can eat immediately, or you can put something in the freezer that you have for the whole week. And I'm telling you can make a plan like for the whole week. Then you are eating like normal. I mean normal like something that I would usually spend lots of money [on] in [a] shop."

(Alma, Foodbank)

Adaptation and creativity

Participants' accounts of how they used the surplus food revealed their work in food adaptation and their creative practices. Keith, who lives with his three school-aged children, tends to receive a lot of ready meals in his food parcel. He explained how he adapted these meals to make a family dinner:

"Usually, it's sort of like you know, like ready meals you know, like the curry with rice, with noodles. With you know chicken and sweet and sour or something. Meals that you just put in the microwave; you know. Sometimes you might get some packets of biscuits, tea bags. Wraps, you know, wraps for making you know that you put stuff in. ... There'll be sort of like three or four ready meals, but they're all sort of different. You know it's not really for preparing a meal for a family. If you know what I mean. I'd have to add stuff to it. You know, boil up a bit of extra rice, add a bit of chicken to it. Stuff like that. ... so, like integrate it into something else you know put the chips on and you know yeah."

(Keith, Housing)

Ariana explained how she arranged a meal with foodbank food, by adding from her own cupboard or buying extra items:

"I actually ended up looking what I have from them and then thinking, what do I already have that I only have a few more ingredients I don't have to buy the whole thing. So, that's how it would help me like I wouldn't have to buy everything. Like they give me beans, so I already have beans so I might just buy, they actually gave me potatoes the other day, so they gave me some fresh vegetables. So, I had beans and potatoes. So, I said I might just buy some breaded fish or some sausages and just do with that you know. So, I just had to buy the meat that's how I go around what I have."

(Ariana, Foodbank)

Through her photo (Photo 15), Alma described her daughter's embarrassment when they accessed the foodbank for the first time. Alma's capacity to use the ingredients to make a wrap that is viewed as 'normal' and 'healthy' changes her daughter's perspective on foodbank food:



Photo 15 A 'normal' wrap (Alma, Foodbank)

"See the wrap like when she made that for school for example it looks like she [bought] that somewhere. So, she's not like feeling bad like before when she had to take you know like some ... from our house. It's looking really good. She's a teen and it's really important to her."
(Alma, Foodbank)

Leonard (Photo 16) also spoke about his capacity to make 'smoothies' for his children from ingredients he has picked up from his FRC. He added some purchased frozen fruit and reported his children's delight:



Photo 16 Smoothie delights (Leonard, Family Resource Centre)

"Just a few minutes ago before I hopped onto this call the girls asked me to make them some smoothies. And so, there was a load of bananas that I got from the centre today and I made them smoothies. So, they were delighted with themselves. So now you can be drinking this. There're two glasses each of smoothies for each of you."
(Leonard, FRC)

The 'second' food chain

In their descriptions of how they used the surplus food from their CVO, there is evidence of an informal or 'second' food chain for the redistribution of surplus food. Participants spoke about moving food beyond their immediate household by sharing it with friends or other family members or by combining it with another household.

Doireann who uses a foodbank where she receives mainly ambient food, maximises the potential of this food when she combines it with another family member also in receipt of foodbank food:

“If I only get the pasta and the Dolmio [sauce] off them, and if I’m kind of down in money that week, my daughter will step in. She will go ahead in, and she will buy the fresh meat that we need for that day. Like if they’re all going to be in ... she will buy the stewing beef and the carrots, and the parsnips. She will pay for dinner that day.”

(Doireann, Foodbank)

After she has used the surplus food to feed her family Seána passes on anything that she does not need to other people in her neighbourhood. She does this to ‘give back’ and to engage with people in her area:

“There is a couple of people around me that if there is a lot of stuff here then I pack bags and bring for them. They wouldn’t necessarily be on the FoodCloud, but it’s just because there would be say stuff here ... Now one gentleman is in his 70s and one lady, she’s 80 something. She just loves the bit of chat and stuff. So, I would drop stuff to them. Now with Covid obviously you can’t go in, but you’d be chatting to them from the front door. You know, here’s a few bits. And I think it’s the whole sense of that you’re looking out for each other.”

(Seána, Foodbank)

For some participants, their actions in the informal food chain are underpinned a strong desire to not waste food, rather than waste food that will not be used, they move it on to friends or family:

“They also send like every week it’s almost the same. There’s a few things that comes every week. And I wouldn’t use [them] every week. So, like the corned beef every week it comes. And there’s carrot in the glass ... And they always send every week and also cornflakes and I wouldn’t really eat cornflakes. So, I just ended up putting in a bag and giving to my boyfriend’s aunty.”

(Ariana, Foodbank)

“Sometimes for example now if I have a lot of canned beans. I just give it to my neighbours she’s very happy if I have ... if I get extra, I just give them. Even in our family you know like my mom, grandma, they say, don’t waste, don’t waste don’t throw it out if you don’t want it to give it to the other one. We had this culture.”

(Rachael, Foodbank)

“Sometimes there might be stuff in it that you wouldn’t use. But if there is, I always try and give it to someone that I know would use it. A friend of mine gets it as well. Well, there’s actually a couple of us. We kind of switch and swap between us anything, she might have something that I’d use, and she wouldn’t, and I’d be the same. Not to be

letting it go to waste ... like the tins of rice ... There's no one in the house that likes it. So, we often pass that on. ... we'd kind of make sure that what we get is used."

(Yasmine, CRC)

Nonetheless, the issue of food waste was also linked to how food was received by participants. Leonard, who had the opportunity through his CVO to self-select food that was open to all, suggested that where there was choice there seemed to be less potential for food waste:

"But the waste can occur that way if it's packaged. Because there are certain items that some families might not really take or use that kind of item. But it's in the bag you have to take everything you know. Other families might prefer something else so, you go in and take it's almost like you're shopping, really, you know."

(Leonard, FRC)

Food and cultural diversity

Community members reflected positively on many aspects of receiving surplus food through a CVO. Nevertheless, some confronted challenges with unfamiliar foods. In both examples that follow, participants did not get to choose the food they received.

Ariana, who comes from a south American country spoke about missing food from her home country and of its expense in specialist shops. She finds it difficult sometimes to use the food from the foodbank. Through her photo (Photo 17) of a tin of meat. She explained:



"But sometimes I kind of struggle to see like what am I going to make with that food because it's not what I'm used to buying? Like they sent me actually, let me see if I can see it, here they sent me like a corned beef. I don't even know what it is, I wouldn't even really ever use that. So, I kind of struggle like trying to search or ask my boyfriend's family, because he's Irish."

(Ariana, Foodbank)

Photo 17 Unfamiliar food 1 (Ariana, Foodbank)

Rachael also spoke about unfamiliar items in her foodbank parcel and of how she endeavoured to make meals like those from her country of origin. She explained how she became familiar with the unfamiliar and found a way to incorporate it in her cooking practice:

"I received a soup, and I asked my neighbour. I told her because in my tradition I don't know how to use it. And I told her I don't know how to use this soup so can you just tell

me. She told me, just boil it, and put it sometimes when you do chicken. And I said OK I give her one. She just made it and she made me to try it and after that I tried to love it. But before I say I don't know this because you know the tradition and maybe it's not the same sometime. But after that I start to eat it [...] we don't have that in our country. I don't know about it. ... I ask like I have my neighbours I ask them, and I love to know all the traditional food."

(Rachael, Foodbank)

Alma, who received a wide range of fresh fruit and vegetables from her CVO's foodbank, talked about unfamiliar food items. Like Rachael and Ariana, she prepared meals that were in keeping with her food cultural background. However, as Alma explained through her photograph (Photo 18), her family did not eat eggplant (aubergine):

"Hey only one thing and this is eggplant. Yeah, because nobody in my family eats that. But you know, here in the back of our house. We have horses. So I take that there and I think they eat it because all is like put them on the ground and they eat that."

(Alma, Foodbank).



Photo 18 Unfamiliar food 2 (Alma, Foodbank)

While Alma and her family were not used to eating eggplant (aubergine), she pointed out that most of the food she received was similar to what she had been used to before coming to Ireland in terms of the ingredients and this allowed her to make meals from her country of origin:

"And then, but everything else like we are using for something. It's the same food like in [country name]. We use everything you know, like the same things, is just maybe that we are making different dishes from that."

(Alma, Foodbank)

Impact: more than food

Whereas much of the conversation with participants focused on the surplus food and how they used it, their narratives also highlighted that the surplus food was more than just food. It helped to relieve financial pressure on their food budgets, provided social connection with interaction around food and added to their overall sense of well-being.

Financial

Participants were clear that the surplus food received through the CVO benefited them financially. It could mean, as explained by Rachael, being able to divert money to other activities related to her children's schooling:

"You know what I do now when I save this thing, like if I have this dried things. I just save it and pay for extra for my kids. They have activity like they have football like I put that money from that to that."

(Rachael, Foodbank)

Alma also described how surplus food impacted on her financial situation. It allowed her to use money on fuel and gain independence. She spoke about the disruption following her family's Covid-19 relocation to a rural area. This had a ripple effect on her family such that she needed to ask a neighbour to pick her child up from school because she could not afford to fuel her car. The money Alma saved on her food bill allowed her to use her car and gave her independence so that she is not under an obligation to her neighbour. This was important for Ariana:

"When I go there like to pick up the food ... then you know then I have [money] for gasoline to pick up my daughter."

(Alma, Foodbank)

Leonard and Keith also spoke about how surplus food benefited them financially:

"I think it's very helpful on a financial aspect you know, a lot of people are having difficult times. And as I said, you know from month to month we don't know how things will be. Because we don't have a stable income, so that makes a huge difference for our family anyway."

(Leonard, FRC)

"Well, it helps to save me money. And like I say, there's always something that you can use. So, sort of like you can add a bit to it, so it just helps financially, really."

(Keith, Housing)

Access to less common or novel items allows participants more latitude to experiment with food, without incurring the costs. This is important in encouraging children to expand on their dietary repertoire:

"Yeah, because you're trying things like that you wouldn't go out and buy because you don't want to be wasting your money if what you buy if it isn't eaten or something, I get to try new things."

(Yasmine, CRC)

We have learned from CVOs themselves about the important role of non-food items in their surplus food distribution work. Community members talked about receiving non-food items such as school supplies, hygiene products and nappies. These items helped to reduce the financial strain.

“Even every year from the foodbank there is a, you know ... the school case like there is pencils, pens, colours.”

(Rachael, Foodbank)

Doireann, through her photo (Photo 19), talked about how personal hygiene products received through her CVO’s foodbank were helpful in her household:

“Actually, last week, the little kit that I sent you with the toothpaste and stuff. We actually got them last week because they were donated to them. ... it spares me from buying toothbrushes, toothpaste. There’s hand sanitizers in there. There’s sanitary towels in it. And the ones that you get for the men there’s socks and stuff, and deodorant for them. And having teenagers like as you know yourself, they need all that kind of stuff. It is expensive to buy but it’s brilliant to be able to get something like that.”

(Doireann, Foodbank)



Photo 19 Hygiene kit (Doireann, Foodbank)

Social connection

Food is central to participants’ experience with the CVO and is often the gateway to various forms of social connection and support.

Ariana remarked that the trip to get the food parcel may also involve help with other matters:

“Sometimes I go meet [name] at the [organisation] for us to talk and she helps me with a few forms and stuff.”

(Ariana, Foodbank)

Peadar reflected that ‘cooking for myself, there’s something about that is kind of lonely’. He emphasised the important social dimension of attending the day centre for a meal:

"I think everything is great about it. When you come in, first of all you're picked up at home. Then your dropped off again at your door. Everything the friendliness of it. People to talk to and there's always something going on in it. It's just something that keeps your mind occupied."

(Peadar, MoW & Day Centre)

Rachael and Seána also remarked on the social support provided by their CVO's foodbank:

"It's not only food, they support you even they are listening, and they give you advice."

(Rachael, Foodbank)

"The cup of tea and the chat that helps too. Cause like I mean I've had a bit of a messy divorce recently and even to come in and just talk to someone who's not judgmental. You know someone who can just, you know, say, listen, we're here for you. Don't panic, it'll be all grand."

(Seána, Foodbank)

For Agnes, who lived alone, a key benefit of attending the day centre for a meal was the opportunity to connect with her contemporaries about their everyday lives:

"Talking to the chef and talking to the girls that are serving and you know talking to each other, you know you'd be just taking about your ailments and if you were going to the doctor and if you got the jab, and if you got the booster and the flu injection."

(Agnes, MoW & Day Centre)

Wellbeing

Participants reflected on how the receipt of surplus food helped their overall sense of wellbeing:

"When it arrives on the Thursday, you know, there's some more stuff going into the fridge, a bit of stuff going in the cupboard, so it takes a bit of weight off your shoulders, you know? It takes a bit of the pressure off. Having to think about that you know."

(Keith, Housing)

"Well, it makes it makes a great job for your health as long as you're able to eat and that you, you know you feel good after it, when you have a dinner, you feel good and you don't feel hungry in the afternoon, then. Like as I say a cup of tea or a slice of toast would do me in the evening or something like that, but that they'll be fine. The dinner's the main meal of the day."

(Bernadette MoW & Day Centre)

"I feel relieved now. I have that it makes me feel a bit happier. ... OK, Tuesday you know Monday I feel OK, I'll see tomorrow what I will get and when I get something like OK, I'll not buy that this week. I feel just happy you know the way I just wait for Tuesday. And I when I get it Wednesday, I get that that I will get to buy this. Do you know? It makes me busy too. Just to think when I go specially to the food bank just, I don't know. I don't feel like stressing. Because here in the house, cleaning, with the kids that is stressful but it's like something hope, something that makes you fresh."

(Rachael, Foodbank)

Particular food items, that might be considered as 'treats' such as the cake in Alma's photo (Photo 20), led to 'happy hour' in her home. The treat was enjoyed by her family and contributed to feeling 'normal' rather than being 'a family in financially tight circumstances':

"This is what I'm saying, like it's not just that they provide the food to you, they provide like a smile on my face. If you know what I mean, like. And it's like not just to me. This is like when I called this cake a 'happy hour.'"

(Alma, Foodbank)

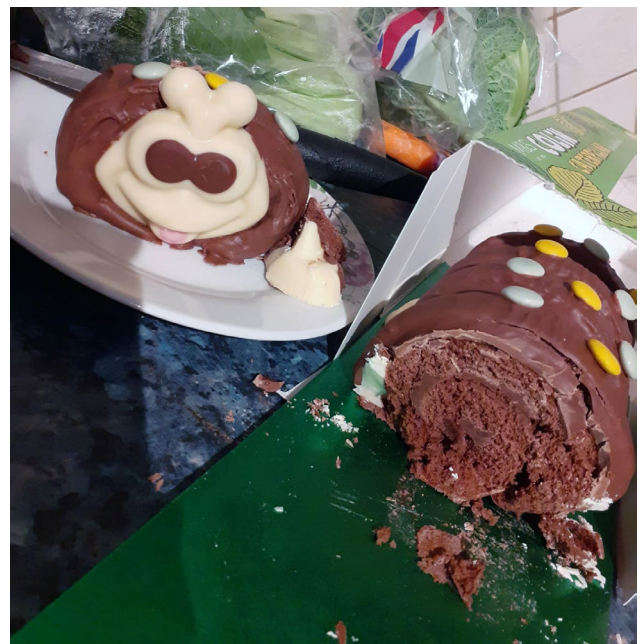


Photo 20 A caterpillar cake for 'happy hour' (Alma, Foodbank)

Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted community members' access to SFD in various ways. Three of the 12 participants did not access food support prior to the pandemic. Of these three, two needed food support directly because of Covid-19 related unemployment. Of those accessing food support before and during the pandemic changes to frequency and variety of food were observed. Social distancing and the closure of some CVOs' onsite services also curtailed social interaction which, as we have seen earlier, is central to the experience of receiving surplus food through a CVO.

Food frequency and variety

Participants reported some disruption to the frequency and variety of food. For Doireann, this meant receiving food once a month as opposed to once a fortnight pre-pandemic.

“We used to get some extra bits and pieces cause shops were donating. But since Covid came in everything was kind of limited. They stopped ... we didn’t get Dolmio, and we didn’t get sugar off of them you know what I mean? It’s just basic. It was just pasta, tea bags, cereal and beans and peas. That wasn’t down to them. That was because of the donations that they were being given. When Covid came in everything kind of clamped down. ... We were getting a lot more stuff. We were getting meats and everything off them we were getting stuff that they had gotten, and it was frozen. So, all we had to do was take it from their freezer and just put it into our own fridge and defrost it. We were getting sausage, rashers. We were getting different types of meat off them. But when Covid came in all that stopped everything just stopped. It was just the basics that we were getting.”

(Doireann, Foodbank)

“Well, it wasn’t as a regular as you know you probably missed one out of every three sort of thing.”

(Keith, Housing)

Leonard’s Family Resource Centre closed for a short period during the early days of the pandemic and disrupted his access to surplus food. He had been used to the open access food shelf at the Family Resource Centre:

“Initially the creche, everything was closed down, so it was a lot of uncertainty financially. We didn’t know if we were going to make it. It was very, very difficult. But once the [organisation] came back up and running, it was still a couple of weeks I’d say before they started putting out food again.”

(Leonard, FRC)

Restrictions

Pandemic-related restrictions, such as social distancing, impacted on how community members experienced their CVO’s surplus food service during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, Evelyn spoke about how social distancing restrictions led to changed food distribution practices at the CVO’s food bank. As we have seen earlier in CVOs’ own accounts of their Covid-19 packing and bagging arrangements, some undesirable practices ensued. Evelyn reflected on the discomfort she felt when having to queue outside to receive her food in a black bin liner bag and this heightened her feelings of shame and embarrassment.

Rachael also emphasised the ‘bags’:

“It’s ready in the bags ... It’s like two bags most of the time they put it into bags because of the Covid. But before it was just, go upstairs and drink tea and stay and just they can come with their own bags and they just collect it.”

(Rachael, Foodbank)

Doireann found the visit to the foodbank during the pandemic less congenial than prior to the pandemic:

“So now that the Covid is in we walk in and either me or my daughter will walk down to [name] with our masks and [name] standing at the door. And the lads just bring the bags out. We don’t go in there anymore. You know what I mean? Since Covid came in, as I said to you, everything is after kind of getting limited.”

(Doireann, Foodbank)

Amongst the participants who experienced disruption to their normal food support service, Seána reported not being able to go to the foodbank as it was outside the 5km limit during one of the lockdowns:

“[W]e didn’t get any. I couldn’t come in. You see, I was outside the bracket because I was in [place name] so I couldn’t come in. So, we just, what we had at home. We just have to get on with it. But yeah, I missed it shocking. It was tight, stuff was very tight at home. Children at home where now they’re at school they’re not eating you out of house and home. Where you’re constantly trying to keep food in the press and everything else. Yeah, you’d miss it alright.”

(Seána, Foodbank)

Covid-19 restrictions disrupted services for those using food banks, as noted above. While meals-on-wheels services continued to deliver, community members could not attend their usual day centre service. As we have seen earlier, social contact at congregate meal settings had been an important part of Agnes’s, Peadar’s and Bernadette’s weekly routine prior to the pandemic. Not being able to attend the day centre as they did pre-pandemic was difficult, as Peadar explained:

“Since the day centre closed down both here and the [organisation name] which I used to go to a lot as well life got dreary ... something to get up for in the morning [to get] out of the house and that kind of way. In the pandemic you just walked out and around the town and just walked back into the house again ... very little connection.”

(Peadar, MoW & Day Centre)

The depth of the impact of the pandemic is illustrated in Agnes’s description of returning to the day centre after Covid-19 restrictions were relaxed:

“It was huge thing to have lost last year and then a few people died during the pandemic. When we went back, we had five or six less. It was a shock because we were kind of so, so, familiar with them. They went into nursing homes and hospital ... and didn’t come out.”

(Agnes, MoW & Day Centre)

“Agnes, commented further that her Thursday visit to the day centre for a meal has become an important space for community members to reflect on and remember those who died during the pandemic: ‘like every Thursday we’re talking about them, you know’.”

(Agnes, MoW & Day Centre)

Conclusion

This chapter has described community members’ perspectives on receiving surplus food from CVOs partnered with FoodCloud. Through the photo-elicitation method, 12 participants spoke about their use of surplus food provided by the CVO, their feelings about using the service, and its overall impact on their health and wellbeing. Participants also reflected on how the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted on their daily lives and their receipt of surplus food.

How people come to access surplus food is varied. For most, the pathway to surplus food takes an informal route, often by referrals through friends, family networks, or from connections with other services. While access through informal connections might be considered as problematic, as those without such connections and in need of food support may not get to access it, the informal process appears ‘softer’ and relational rather than the welfare-based model of food support as seen in US, UK and Australia.

Community members who receive surplus food show that relationships are central in their experience of receiving surplus food. In the case of foodbank recipients, the initial visit to a foodbank generates feelings of shame and a sense of failure. This may be related to the negative connotations that surround foodbanks. It was clear, though, from participants’ accounts that the approach of foodbank staff was friendly and non-stigmatising and engendered mutual respect and dignity.

Participants’ accounts of how they used surplus food revealed that they needed to have skills in planning, the capacity to adapt and to be creative. They also showed how they dealt with unfamiliar foods and of how they were strongly opposed to wasting food. Where participants had the opportunity to ‘help themselves’ through community pantries, or where their foodbank also provided a community pantry, there was the potential for less waste and for choice. Participants

also engaged in an 'informal food chain' where they redistributed food that they did not use. The findings illustrate that receiving surplus food is much more than food. It involves opportunities for social connection with CVOs and other supports, and for some, the opportunity to 'give back' and get involved in community surplus food distribution activities.

Non-food items, such as flowers, hygiene products were also important as well as treat items, like cake. These all help to 'normalise' what it means to receive surplus food. Apart from the three meals-on-wheels and day centre recipients, the other participants who received food from a CVO used it to extend their food budgets and to direct money saved to other family needs, particularly child-related. In this way, surplus food could relieve stress for families during financial pinch points associated with Christmas, birthdays, and school extra-curricular activities.

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on how participants accessed food to varying degrees. It was felt more acutely where participants had frequented day centres that closed at the onset of the pandemic and where participants had been used to collecting food themselves through community or family resource centres. Participants reported disruption to the frequency and the supply of food. Travel restrictions, social distancing and hygiene regulations altered participants' experience of receiving surplus food. Social interaction, which underpins the fabric of CVOs' SFD work, was greatly reduced.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and issues for consideration

Research objectives

Research Objective 1

Identify the types of community groups and charities that provided food during the Covid-19 pandemic

In June 2020 FoodCloud initiated a survey of its membership to determine what changes CVOs had experienced in food service provision since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020: the initial phase of the pandemic. The survey was completed by 193 respondents, representing a substantial proportion of FoodCloud's membership. Most responding CVOs (70%) in the FoodCloud survey had remained open over the period of the pandemic. Around two-thirds had experienced an increased demand for their services. Demand was predominately from individuals who had been experiencing Covid-19-related income difficulties and families with children/young people not at school, where they would have received subsidised meals. Around one half of CVOs experienced an increased demand from older people and around one third from single parents and another third from people with mental health concerns.

The present research study has confirmed that a broad range of CVOs continued to be involved in SFD during the pandemic. The span of CVOs ranged from small groups to larger established services. Some had no paid staff while others had a significant number of employees; within this continuum there was a wide range of CVO types and structures. Only a small number (2/22) of CVOs had become involved for the first time in SFD during the pandemic – the great majority had already been involved in the provision of some type of food service and had previously partnered with FoodCloud.

All CVOs relied to some extent on volunteers: some marginally, some completely, with a range of positions in between. State-funded community employment (CE or Tús) workers were an important element of the workforce in many CVOs. CVOs had access to greatly varying levels of infrastructure. At one extreme were bodies with extensive storage including commercial fridges and freezers, cooking facilities, professional chefs, vans or other vehicles, forklift trucks and outdoor spaces including gardens and polytunnels. At the other extreme were volunteers working with limited storage space, domestic equipment and their own private cars. Again, there was a continuum of infrastructural support for SFD amongst CVOs.

Research Objective 2

Describe how the provision of food during Covid-19 was different from food provision before the pandemic

The interviews with key informants from CVOs took place (in late 2021 to early 2022) when the Covid-19 pandemic was still very much part of their everyday lives. Participants were more inclined to talk about their experiences during the pandemic than before. Nonetheless, the most significant difference that was reported between the pre-pandemic and pandemic period related to the provision of communal meals that supported social interaction. During the pandemic, it was not possible to host meals in communal settings and CVOs had to find ways to deliver services off-site. This was particularly the case for those who had habitually provided regular congregate meals for older people, but also for youth, mental health and disability services where people received food as part of a programme of activities.

Pre-pandemic, fundraising was an important activity for CVOs that contributed significantly to their overall running costs, including for food activities. Food provision services were generally oriented to a stable community membership, aligned with the organisation's focus. Many organisations depended heavily on the support of older volunteers, particularly retired members of the community.

The pandemic changed CVOs' food provision practices. Physical distancing, hygiene measures and travel restrictions meant that many CVOs lost volunteers and Community Employment workers. Volunteers, particularly those over the age of 70, were advised to 'cocoon' and others had underlying conditions that made them unavailable. Key changes that were introduced included the delivery of food parcels to those who had previously attended onsite meals. Additionally, CVOs faced greater demands for food from new client groups: including those who had become unemployed; and families where children were at home and had been used to receiving food in school and after school settings. At the onset of the pandemic, foodbanks, in particular, had to find new ways to operate and to simultaneously keep everyone safe in the face of an upsurge in demand. New measures included, queuing, spacing, reconstruction of kitchens and other operating spaces, and greater use of plastic bags and other packaging.

Research Objective 3

Identify why did community groups and charities choose to provide food over other support

There was little evidence that CVOs had chosen to discontinue other activities and move into food-related ones. Of course, the pandemic meant there was a broad range of communal and face-to-face activities that were no longer possible or permissible in the context of the public health restrictions. In some cases, staff who had previously been involved in such activities became (more) involved in SFD.

Apart from two of those that participated in the research, all CVOs had been engaged in food provision using SFD through FoodCloud prior to the onset of the pandemic. One organisation that engaged with surplus food distribution [SFD] through FoodCloud for the first time did so as they were aware that other agencies involved in SFD were not reaching everyone in need. Interestingly, although this CVO did not continue with SFD for a range of reasons related to transportation costs, supply predictability, and variety of foodstuffs, their experience has broadened their remit around sustainable food practices, and they plan to be more involved in the future. In the second case, the CVO identified need among community members who could no longer access onsite services and it responded through the establishment of a food parcel delivery service to existing members.

CVOs found that involvement in food services was an excellent way to maintain contact with community members when other services might have had to be curtailed or even stopped. Participants described how they would deliberately link food service activities with other means of support, from casual greetings and conversation through to proactive outreach to more formal referral to services.

Research Objective 4

Show how CVOs connected and interacted with recipients during the pandemic

CVOs engaged in a wide range of activities where practicable and permissible within the public health guidelines in force and the resources that were available to them. While the ability to continue with many on-site activities was constrained, CVOs found new ways to keep connected to their communities. This effort of connection included deliveries to community members of food items, larger food parcels and partially cooked or cooked meals. This gave CVOs the opportunity to maintain contact, especially with isolated or vulnerable community members, through phone calls or WhatsApp groups and/or interaction on the doorstep. Often CVOs responded to requests to assist isolated or vulnerable people that came from other family and community members.

Some CVOs provided pick-up services where community members could safely access a variety of food and non-food items. Again, there was the possibility here to provide further support or referral where necessary. A small number of CVOs engaged in a range of online activities, such as cooking demonstrations.

CVOs were conscious that there were many new users of services as well as existing participants who were under increased stress. They made efforts to be as inclusive as possible in their service delivery, using creativity and imagination to provide novel services and to provide existing services in a dignified and non-stigmatising manner.

Some CVOs developed new or enhanced relationships with local retailers, food services and other community organisations that supported them in their food distribution work during the onset of the crisis.

Research Objective 5

Describe service users' experience in accessing food, in terms of their needs, during Covid-19

How service users come to access surplus food is varied. For most, this takes an informal route through referrals by friends, family networks, or from connections with other services. We can thus see that relationships are central in their experience of receiving surplus food.

In the case of foodbank recipients, going to a foodbank for the first time can generate feelings of shame and/or a sense of failure. This may be related to the negative connotations that surround foodbanks. Yet, those who used foodbanks reported that the approach of foodbank staff was usually friendly and welcoming. Efforts were made to deliver services in ways that did not induce stigma. From both CVOs' accounts and community members themselves, there was a strong sense that the food assistance encounter was underpinned by respect and dignity.

People who received surplus food showed that to maximise its potential in their family circumstances that they needed to have skills in planning, the capacity to adapt and to be creative. The food received could, on the one hand, be very basic and require enhancement, on the other it might be novel and unexpected. Participants showed how they dealt with unfamiliar foods and of how they were strongly opposed to wasting food. Where they had the opportunity to 'help themselves' through community pantries, or other systems that made food available in a less deterministic way, there was the potential for less waste and for choice. Participants also engaged in an 'informal' or 'secondary' food chain where they redistributed, to others, food that they did not themselves make use of.

Receiving surplus food is about much more than the food. It involves opportunities for social connection with CVOs and other supports, and for some, the opportunity to 'give back' and get involved in community surplus food distribution activities.

Non-food items, such as flowers and hygiene products were also important, as well as treat items, like cake and snacks. These help to 'normalise' what it means to receive surplus food. Where relevant, participants who received food from a CVO, used it to extend their food budgets and to direct money saved to other family needs, particularly child-related ones. In this way, surplus food could relieve stress for families at times of financial pressure associated with Christmas, birthdays and children's educational activities.

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on how participants accessed food in different ways. It appeared to be felt more acutely by those who had frequented day centres that closed at the

onset of the pandemic and where participants had been used to collecting food themselves through community or family resource centres. Participants reported disruption to the frequency and the supply of food. Travel restrictions, physical distancing and hygiene regulations altered participants' experience of receiving surplus food. Despite CVOs' efforts to reach out to its community members, everyday social interaction, which underpins the fabric of CVOs' SFD work, was in many cases, significantly reduced owing to physical distancing, sanitation and the necessity to wear face coverings.

Research Objective 6

Outline the challenges and opportunities experienced by CVOs in food provision during the Covid-19 pandemic

There is no doubt that continuing to operate a food service during the Covid-19 pandemic was challenging for all CVOs. In line with earlier FoodCloud research, it was apparent that all CVOs experienced new demands from people who had never previously accessed food assistance, for example, those dependent on formal and informal income with organisations that had closed, those who worked in the entertainment industry, construction, and older people who could not leave their houses as they were advised to cocoon. The closure of restaurants and other food businesses also brought new supplies of food – in food type and quantity - that presented both challenges and opportunities for CVOs.

CVOs found that they needed to find new ways to operate. As in the commercial food sector, many 'pivoted' to food delivery. There were also changed arrangements to keep everyone safe and with extensive adoption of public health practices, up to and including the development of additional kitchens and remodelling of premises, but also including more routine activities such as additional cleaning and the packing and bagging of food. New ways of operating curtailed the social interaction that had been central to their work.

To engage in SFD, CVOs require strategies around labour and logistics. With or without a pandemic, the work of SFD involves volunteers and employees; physical labour; emotional labour and empathy; organisational and managerial capacities; knowledge skills, techniques, experience and knowhow; and technology and infrastructure. All these bring challenges and opportunities for CVOs. Their accounts revealed a great deal about the 'how' of SFD and about what works and does not work in particular contexts. The lack of availability of the usual volunteer workforce, due to cocooning and the impact of Covid-19, was a major challenge for CVOs. Some were able to connect with new volunteer populations, for example in local sports clubs. This brought CVOs into contact with the community in new ways.

How CVOs use food and non-food items in their SFD operations highlights dilemmas and opportunities in terms of the surplus of bread and bakery products, culturally appropriate (and inappropriate or unfamiliar) food, nutritional quality and non-food items. The latter, in the

form of flowers, plants, and children's activities could provide a welcome respite for families from the pressure of the pandemic. In broader terms, non-food items, also functioned to 'normalise' the experience of receiving surplus food.

Relationship work with retailers is central to how CVOs do SFD. Where the needs of both retailers and CVOs are understood, there is greater potential to maximise the opportunities afforded by surplus food.

CVOs added value to surplus food in various ways, all underpinned by a strong desire to not waste food. They have alternative networks for redistribution, raise awareness in their work about surplus food and engage in creative practices to add value to surplus food.

Surplus food has economic benefits for CVOs. It can bring cost savings where budgets for food are very limited. Nonetheless, there is a need to recognise that the labour processes involved in SFD can expose CVOs to additional and significant costs for infrastructure and transportation. In some cases, CVOs were able to draw on existing networks, or create new ones, to manage SFD and to manage food flows; there is potential for more development in this area.

Key issues arising from the research

In this final section we reflect on the totality of the research, including the issues and debates around SFD identified in Chapter 2. We hope that consideration of these issues will provide a starting point for some debate within the Irish context as to the value and operation of SFD, as well as inputting to the future development of FoodCloud's activities and direction.

Surplus Food Distribution is work

This research has provided an insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SFD amongst the CVOs that partner with FoodCloud. It has focused on the *movement* of surplus food after it has been allocated to a particular CVO and we have shown that this movement demands the application of substantial physical effort, technologies, skills, routines, knowledge, relationships and time. The effective operation of SFD needs effort and creativity, application of significant resources and important commitments. It requires the development and maintenance of relationships – not least between those involved (often as volunteers) with CVOs, and staff employed in the 'conventional' food chain, such as supermarket workers. It can also be physically demanding, especially when assistive technologies, such as forklifts or vans, are unavailable.

Workers involved in SFD include volunteers and paid staff of CVO and retailers, while the types of work can include physical labour, emotional work, care work, complex organisational and managerial activities and creative thinking. The evidence we have presented in the study gets to the heart of how SFD is carried out in practical ways by people within CVOs and the associated

challenges and opportunities that arise. This work was part of the operation of SFD prior to the pandemic. It is in some ways the invisible part of the process – not particularly well-explored in the extensive international literature on SFD. The research reveals that the work of SFD does not stop when surplus food is transferred from retailer, wholesaler or food service to an organisation that must ‘handle it’ as best it can.

The Covid-19 pandemic exerted additional pressures on CVOs and their staff: from increased and changed demands for food; the necessity (mirroring the commercial food sector) to ‘pivot’ from on-site service to delivery and packaging; application of new tools and technologies, from freeze-drying to black bin-bags; to the need to engage in new ways in the intense relational work that is part of service delivery in the alternative food sector. All these changes required additional work; in many cases when the ‘supply’ of volunteers had virtually dried up, due to cocooning and public health restrictions.

The work in SFD is highly conscientious: staff of CVOs (and community members) are strongly opposed to food wastage and divert food through channels that include networks of people, and use of food to feed animals and fertilise plants. Staff exhibit a strong ethos of care (Parsons et al 2021) that translates into concern for community members and a sensitivity to matters of stigma and dignity. There was concern, for example, when hygiene guidelines forced workers to distribute food in plastic binbags: while safer in biological terms, it was negative in terms of how the CVO and the community members might be perceived.

The models of SFD that locate it at one end of the commercial food chain (as illustrated in Fig 2.1 in Chapter 2) tend to see SFD as a destination. There is less known about what happens once the surplus food has been delivered to a charitable or community agency. It is hoped that this research study will throw some light on the significant voluntary and paid work of many diverse kinds that is involved in the practices of SFD and that further research is carried out in this somewhat hidden aspect of the field.

Question for consideration: how can the extensive and varied work of the paid and volunteer staff of CVOs (and associated retailers and donors) be recognised, supported and celebrated in SFD?

Effective SFD depends on relationships, connection and community

Something that came through particularly strongly in this study was that the instigation, development and maintenance of personal relationships is central to successful engagement with SFD. Again, like the issue of work, this holds for SFD prior to the onset of the pandemic, but the relational basis was emphasised as the crisis evolved. It is apparent that an ‘ethics of care’ underpins the work of SFD.

Surplus food distribution work was much more than food provision. Food served as a tool for engagement, for connecting people with others and the opportunity to offer support in other aspects of their lives. Similar findings have been reported in the context of food initiatives that make use of surplus food and that eschew market-driven responses to food assistance in favour of a community-led approach (Bruckner et al 2021; Herrington & Mix, 2021; Marovelli, 2019).

The relationships that the staff of CVOs develop with retailers, food service companies and with FoodCloud staff are also very important to the successful operation of SFD. Retailers, for their part, need to understand and value the surplus food and work with CVOs to maximise its potential, as many do. In turn, as Gruber et al (2016) have pointed out, CVOs need to know how SFD works at the retail end and how to maximise their relationship with the retailer and the opportunities for SFD. The relationships between CVOs and retailers have the capacity to extend past market-based notions of corporate social responsibility [CSR] but can be the basis for companies' involvement in community-based sustainable food initiatives.

As we consider the centrality of relationships, connection and community in CVOs' SFD work it is worthwhile to reflect on the antecedents of the Irish community and voluntary sector, which may be traced to the idea of the *meitheal*, where people in rural Ireland came together to help each other during harvests and other key events such as funerals. Such acts took place against the backdrop of life under colonialism and the absence of welfare supports but supported communities' self-determinism. Arguably, the idea of the *meitheal* reverberates in the work of the CVOs that participated in this study. There is an opportunity to harness the uniqueness of the Irish CVO sector's approach to SFD.

Question for consideration: How might surplus food distribution be accessed, used and valued by all, including retailers and producers, to support communities in the pursuit of social justice and sustainable local food systems?

The operation of SFD requires a certain level of infrastructure and capacity and has its costs

The research revealed that the successful operation of SFD is likely to mean a significant investment in the 'logistics' of food movement and this can demand technological and infrastructural resources. Such resources include those related to food storage, such as cool rooms, fridges and freezers, in addition to presses and shelving. They also include resources related to transportation of food, such as trolleys, forklift trucks and cars and vans and the insurance and maintenance of these resources.

Handling of food always requires careful attention to issues of traceability, hygiene and storage, but this was intensified during the pandemic. This was where experience and training in areas such as HACCP, food safety and manual handling came to the fore.

Conversely, lack of infrastructural resources can place extra burdens on the staff of CVOs. There was evidence from a small number of participants in the research of physical risks (eg back injuries) in the movement of food, which can be heavy, bulky and awkward. Lack of access to vans or other specialised vehicles meant that food had to be conveyed in some participants' private vehicles, with the attendant costs and risks. The necessity to raise funds to acquire necessary equipment like forklifts and commercial-standard fridges and freezers was a burden on some CVOs. On occasions, equipment like this was provided by donors and in such cases was highly appreciated. At its worst, lack of infrastructure has the capacity to prevent or curtail CVOs' involvement in SFD.

It was not cost-free for CVOs to engage in SFD. Even if the food was available for 'free' or for a subscription fee, it was still costly to store, transport and to package for delivery or distribution: for example, in payment for plastic bags, even to dispose of food when it could not be used. On the other hand, the availability of free or heavily discounted food allowed CVOs to divert resources into other areas. Food and non-food items could also be used as fund-raiser, for example through raffles.

Question for consideration: How might CVOs be supported and facilitated in acquiring and maintaining the necessary infrastructure (including relevant training) to support and enhance their capacity to be involved in surplus food distribution?

Inclusive practices are crucial to effective SFD

Food and eating are central to everyday life. Food is personal and social, and an important public policy issue in relation to health and wellbeing, environment, and food security. People experience food security at a personal and emotional level, as individuals, or as family and community members. In a wealthy society like Ireland, it is not expected that people will experience hunger or the inability to procure food, although there is considerable evidence that those who are marginalised face these challenges. Thus, food insecurity is often seen as a personal failing (Bruckner et al 2021), as we have seen in the accounts of community members who accessed food assistance through a foodbank for the first time. It is thus important that food assistance is delivered in a sensitive, respectful and non-stigmatising way.

There is considerable evidence in this report to demonstrate that CVOs' work in SFD stands apart from the welfarist model of SFD that dominates, for example, in the UK, Australia and the US. Amongst the participants, some foodbanks were inevitably constrained in their offer by the limited range of staple foods provided through the FEAD programme and its requirement to target the most 'needy'. Nonetheless, such CVOs demonstrated imagination and agency by combining FEAD food with other produce and, in some cases, providing vouchers for shops where community members could make their own choices.

Additionally, some CVOs made conscious decisions to destigmatise the act of receiving surplus food by making it available for all through open access shelves or community pantries, while also operating a foodbank. Others used the provision of donated non-food items, such as flowers, toys, plants or personal hygiene products that can help to normalise everyday life. Some made specific efforts to re-frame 'poverty food', for example by incorporating it into recipes with other ingredients, reprocessing lower value food, such as turning surplus bread into breadcrumbs or garlic bread, and carefully handling issues of cultural familiarity and acceptance of certain types of food.

Perhaps, to some extent, CVOs in this study could be viewed as falling somewhere between Midgley's (2020) 'brokerage' and 'challenger' models of SFD. The former focuses on getting surplus food from providers to those in 'need' and is an approach commonly seen in government welfare policies (Long et al 2020). The latter engages in activities that involve more plural and collective food-sharing practices and the reworking of the relationships between donors and receivers. Barnard and Mourad (2020) point to the blurring that can occur between actors in the two models, to the extent that highly active challenger-type organisations (like *DiscoSoupe*) can become more like broker models when partnering with corporate organisations. It is important for all organisations involved in SFD to understand the political dynamics of work in this arena, and to appreciate the broader implications of their approach to SFD.

The research presents an opportunity to consider whether, or to what extent, SFD in Ireland should be framed within a food poverty discourse. Many researchers (for example, Caraher & Furey 2017; Dowler & O'Connor 2012; May et al 2019; Spring & Biddulph 2020) have argued and shown that SFD alone cannot address problems that arise from societal structural inequalities, and this argument was made by some participants in this research, albeit that it was not one of the research questions.

To place such a responsibility on SFD alone, would in effect transfer the symptoms of both structural inequality and food waste from government and commercial entities to the community and voluntary sector. There is an opportunity through the work of FoodCloud and its CVO partners to change the current discourse on SFD and to define a new way of knowing and understanding what it involves, what it costs and who benefits. There may be a risk, given the neoliberal trajectory of Irish social welfare policy, that SFD becomes entrapped within poverty work. As critics have noted (Arcuri 2019; Spring & Biddulph 2020) many like to present SFD as a 'win-win solution'. Such critics, and this research, suggest that the situation is more complex.

Question for consideration: Should SFD in Ireland be framed within a 'food poverty' discourse? What are the advantages, disadvantages and unforeseen consequences of framing it in this way?

Innovation, the 'second food chain' and the future of SFD

Surplus Food Distribution has, as many analysts have identified, become part of the welfare systems of many societies: positioned as a solution to food poverty and food insecurity. It has also become a potential part of the solution to the challenge of mitigating anthropogenic climate change. It has, in other words, become mainstream – as evidenced by the structured involvement of global retailers and food producers through entities such as the Courtauld Commitment, the Irish Food Waste Charter and the Global FoodBanking Network. For a variety of reasons, some of the key players in the generation of food waste and surplus food have become involved in finding solutions.

We have shown that CVOs are a crucial part of the establishment and maintenance of a 'second' food chain, once food has been deemed to be 'surplus'. Based on an aversion to the generation of waste, food is distributed by CVOs to other organisations, amongst family members and to other people in their community. The operation of this second food chain requires manifold forms of work and a substantial infrastructure. As outlined above, the work and creativity that is evinced by CVOs is not always recognised: policy attention tends to be focused on the progenitors of surplus food at the retail/food service end and the needs of 'hungry' or food insecure recipients at the other end.

By 'opening the box' of what happens to surplus food once it enters the 'second food chain', this research has shown how CVOs do some very innovative work with surplus food. The work of SFD often involves much more than the receipt and distribution of food: it extends past 'simply moving the food waste around' (Spring & Biddulph 2020, p. 12). It is also about more than people who experience food poverty or insecurity: it has the capacity to meet the needs of many, if not all, in a community. The experience of the pandemic, which served to greatly broaden the reach and impact of SFD, reinforced this potential.

Some of the ways that CVOs make use of surplus food points directly to the potential of a connected and circular economy. For those CVOs with the capacity to cook surplus food, staff often demonstrate an interest in being involved and creative with the food that is available. Innovation is demonstrated in practices with surplus food where CVOs had access to gardens and people skilled in growing. Such CVOs, strongly opposed to food waste, showed how they closed the loop in SFD by composting, growing vegetables or by feeding surplus bread to chickens in return for eggs. Some CVOs involved in SFD used it formally and informally as a tool for education about sustainable living and lifeskills. Such practices highlight not only the capacities needed to add value to surplus food, but the role and place of surplus food in building sustainable food communities.

Multiple CVOs and community members may be engaged in SFD in the same geographic area and, in keeping with the idea of the *meitheal*, they help each other out. This was clearly shown

at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the complex nature of SFD, with the reliance on voluntary labour and personal resources, and the unpredictability of food type and supply, there would be merit in better co-ordination among community partners in the same area. Indeed, the final focus groups, where CVOs came together to consider the findings, resulted in some collaboration and knowledge sharing amongst participants.

What is the potential of SFD in terms of a response to food needs and the need to minimise the production of climate-changing emissions? The research indicates that there is a strong community of CVOs that have a commitment to the minimisation of food waste, are engaged in a wide range of innovative practices, and have developed complex networks to move surplus food into the broader community. Challenges include the heavy reliance on volunteer labour, the costs and burdens of infrastructure and logistics, and a possible narrowing of policy after the pandemic that may see SFD as primarily a response to food poverty.

Industry groups and government may be attracted to the concept of 'win-win' in addressing surplus food: whereby SFD is seen as an attractive solution to both food waste and food insecurity. We believe that this is a limiting, if understandable, approach. It chimes with notions of corporate social responsibility that tend to maintain existing structures and ways of doing things (Gruber et al 2016). There is potential, identified by many of the leading writers in the field, to extend the impact and effectiveness of SFD by developing sustainable food communities at the local level, where communities in the form of active CVOs and individuals can partner with local and global companies and other agencies to directly address issues of food security but also broader issues of food sovereignty and local control over food (SAPEA 2020, p. 64).

Some of the useful concepts for thinking about the future of SFD include social practice theory, community economics and 'food as commons'. Social practice theory, as its name suggests, points us to a focus on the practices that people engage in as they seek to successfully address challenges (SAPEA 2020, p. 53): it has been used to better understand the challenges of dealing with waste at the household level (Evans 2012), while at the social level it has been used, for example, by Diprose and Lee (2021) in their analysis of the successful Kaibosh 'food rescue' organisation in New Zealand. It draws our attention to the 'skills', 'stuff' and 'images' inherent in everyday practices and routines, which are built on the values that people hold. A focus on practice moves us beyond questions of attitude or ideology and, Diprose and Lee (p. 146) argue, helps to 'shift the emphasis from individualised guilt, moralism, or despair to collective action', agency and hope. We have argued in this report that a clear focus on the work and skills of SFD, on the materiality of the food in question, and on how SFD is framed and imagined, are all central to how we understand it.

For Diprose and Lee (2021, p. 145) the key questions are 'how [do] communities form around the common of surplus food, and negotiate everyday ethical questions around access, use,

benefit, care, and responsibility'. Values of care and respect are central, and the 'ethics of care' is increasingly moving to the centre of debates about the post-pandemic society (Lynch 2022). There is a 'crisis of care', with shortages both of people to 'provide care' and the money (or political commitment) to pay for it. Ireland has a strong tradition of care inherent in community structures and attitudes. This pervades the worldview of the participants in this study: it is a good basis on which to start. Many of the CVOs involved in SFD conceive of themselves as 'community' rather than 'charity' organisations.

This is where the notion of 'food as commons' (SAPEA 2020, p. 59; de Schutter et al 2019, Vivero-Pol et al 2019) and community economy come into play. As Diprose and Lee (2021, p. 146) indicate:

A community economy emerges from 'a set of ethical practices and negotiations that foster wellbeing and livelihood ... communities form around commons and commoning practices to meet material needs, including: the ownership and access arrangements that sustain a commons and how people shift to commoning practices.

This is an approach that sees food in its full social and cultural context, rather than just a commodity within a commercial food system. What we refer to here are broad and holistic community-based arrangements that see food as a focus.

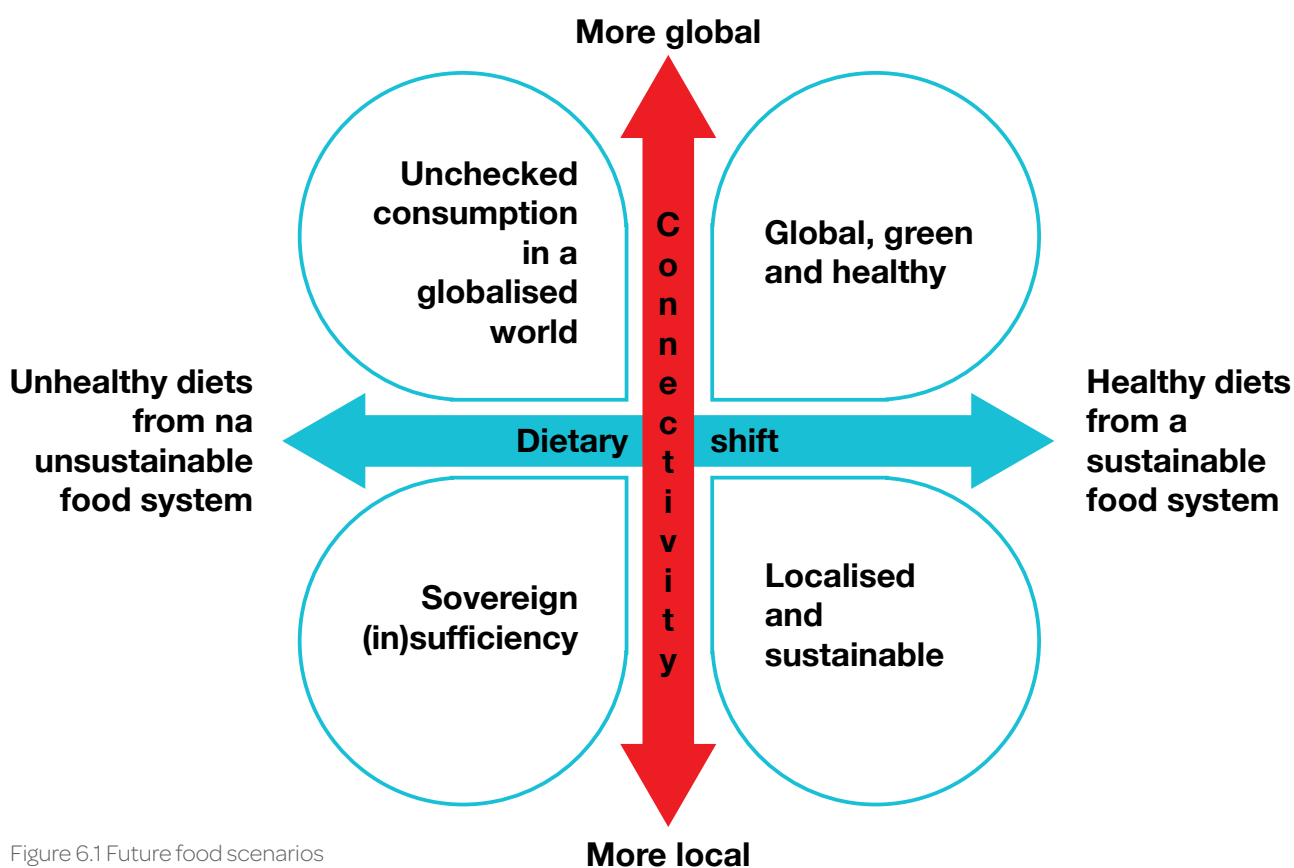


Figure 6.1 Future food scenarios
(Benton, 2019, cited in SEPEA 2020, p. 48)

The recent comprehensive expert report by SAPEA, a European-wide review of food and sustainability, presents much evidence to inform future debates around SFD. It reminds us that the current food system is unsustainable and strongly linked to the climate emergency. It also emphasises that 'environmental, health and socio-economic issues are interconnected and do not exist in separate silos' (SAPEA 2020, p. 18). A map of the food system, developed by Benton (2019, cited in SAPEA 2020, p. 48) (Fig 6.1) indicates where a local and sustainable approach to food can be located.

The SAPEA report suggests (2020, p. 75) that while 'food-sharing initiatives are not a silver bullet for developing a more sustainable global food system', given the complexity of issues involved and the variety of such initiatives, they do provide 'demonstration effects of innovation from below, with sustainability goals at the core'. There remains great potential to explore how SFD, as experienced by many of the CVOs and community members who participated in this study, could become the basis of innovative, transformative sustainable community food initiatives.

Question for consideration: Is this the time for a paradigm shift in SFD? How can we use SFD in a broader context to help to build more resilient, community-centred and effective responses to the unsustainability of current food systems that contribute to food insecurity and climate emergency?

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Appendix 1: OpinionX survey

A total of 253 CVOs attempted the OpinionX survey, of which 196 fully engaged by responding to opinions and providing some of their own (others may have started the survey, chosen not to respond, and re-engaged later). The number of completed responses (196) mirrors those responding to FoodCloud’s own earlier survey (193).

The range of respondent organisations (n = 217) is illustrated in Figure 1. The most frequently occurring types of organisation were ‘older people’s services’ (n = 34), ‘food banks’ (n=34) and ‘combined’ organisations (i.e., were engaged in multiple types of service delivery) (n = 33). The breadth of organisation types that responded to the OpinionX survey was similar to those in FoodCloud’s July 2020 survey.

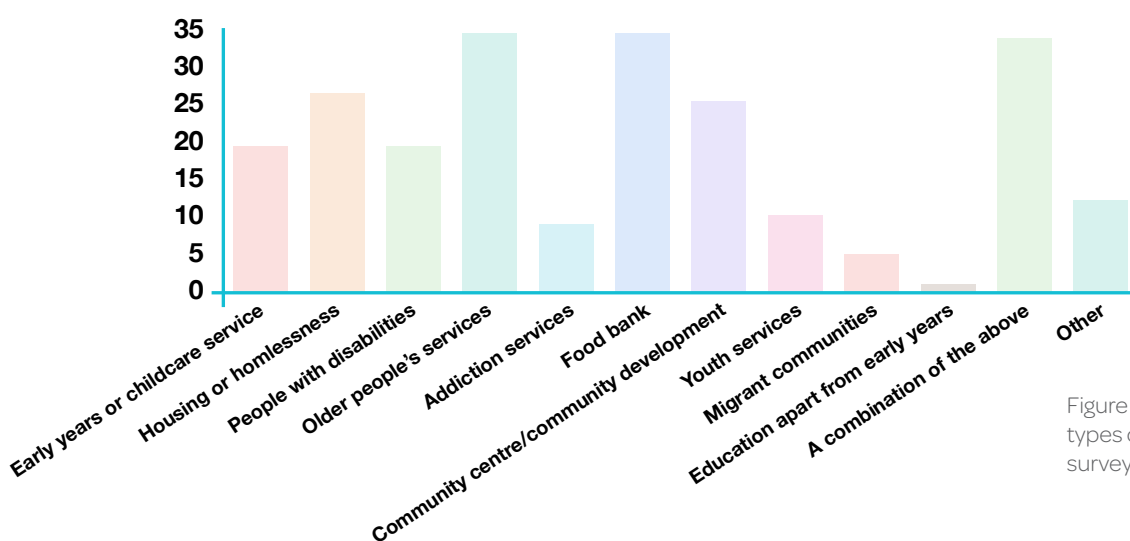


Figure 3 Organisation types of OpinionX survey participants

The participants in the OpinionX survey were located in rural (country and rural town) and urban (suburb and city centre) locations. The distribution is indicated in Figure 4.

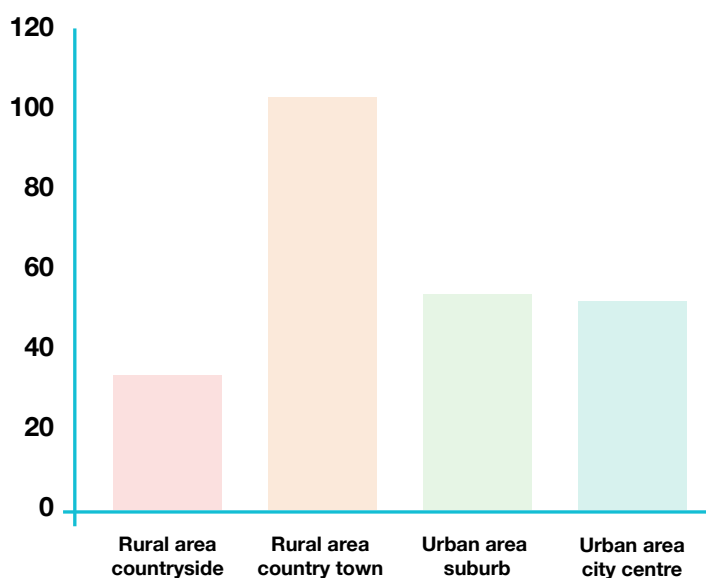


Figure 4 CVOs – location

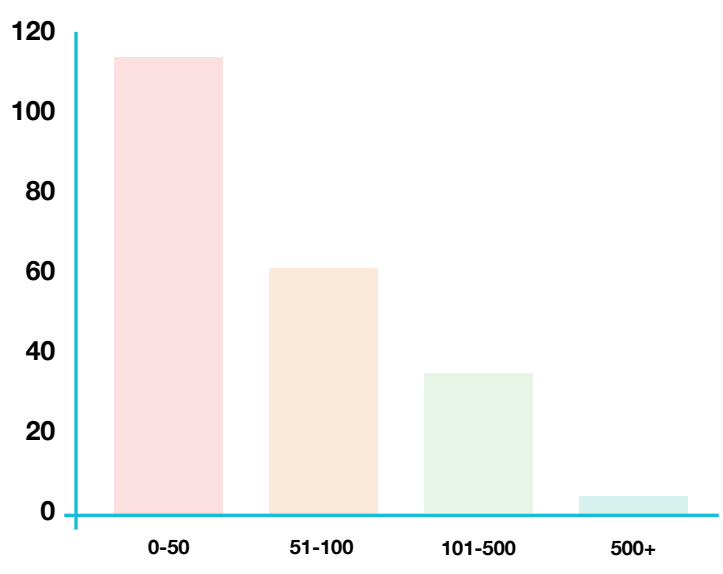


Figure 5 indicates the scale of operation of the OpinionX respondents. The majority (81%) were smaller organisations, distributing food to <100 persons per week.

Figure 5 Scale of operation: service users per week

The OpinionX survey was designed to elicit viewpoints and perspectives in relation to CVOs’ involvement with FoodCloud, and to surface pertinent issues that could inform the in-depth interviews. The responses did indicate some of the key challenges for CVOs, some of which did reflect the pandemic-related circumstances. The ten ‘most important’ (as determined by participants’ voting patterns) are indicated in Table 2. Five of the ten leading opinions (nos. 1, 4 and 10) specifically related to the impact of Covid-19. The majority of the opinions expressed by CVOs related more generally to the myriad types of issues associated with food redistribution activity, which included variety, suitability, and quality of available food; longevity of food; cost reduction; food waste awareness; and salience of surplus food distribution within the overall CVO set of activities.

Opinion	Importance
Having food available was a great way to keep connected with people	1st
It would be great if more variety of food could be provided	2nd
If some of the food provided had a later sell-by date, it would be of more benefit to those we help	3rd
Food provision is much more an important part of our service now, compared to before the pandemic	4th
Getting food through FoodCloud has helped keep our costs down	5th
FoodCloud helps to raise our awareness of food waste	6th
Sometimes we receive food which is not in good condition and we have to dispose of it	7th
Sometimes what is available is not of great use to us as our service users won’t eat it	8th
FoodCloud services are still a minor part of our overall activities	9th
Food-based actions were a great way to keep staff and/or volunteers busy when other tasks were impossible due to COVID-19	10th

Table 2 OpinionX survey: most important opinions expressed by CVOs

Appendix 2: Composite narratives

Narrative 1



Esther, Meals and Wheel and Day Centre

Esther lives in a rural town, is 78 years old and lives alone. Her main source of income is the state pension. She receives meals-on-wheels and attends a day service where she receives a meal. Both services are provided by the same organisation. The service providers include food they receive through the FoodCloud retail app in the meal provision service. During Covid-19, while the centre was closed during the various lockdowns, she still received meals through the meals-on-wheels service.

Using this service saves Esther the trouble of cooking for one. The meals are affordable and provide variety that she would not be able to provide for herself. Cooking for one has its challenges:

“Cooking for myself there’s something about that is kind of lonely or something or depression or something like that. ... you use the same things all the time and there isn’t much of an atmosphere to it.”

(Esther CN 1)

Esther finds the meals-on-wheels service handy and it means there is a meal there for her when she is hungry. As well as commenting favourably about the variety, she notes how dessert is a welcome treat that she would not otherwise have:

“I think it makes all the difference your meal comes it’s cooked. And you just feel hungry, and you put it into the micro, and you just heat it and your meal, your dinner is up on the table. I remember having to go out and buy it and come back and having to go cooking. It’s one of the things that just slows you up and also, when you’d have it cooked and that kind of thing, you mightn’t feel like dinner maybe ... and I do have a lovely dessert too.

I love the desserts!”

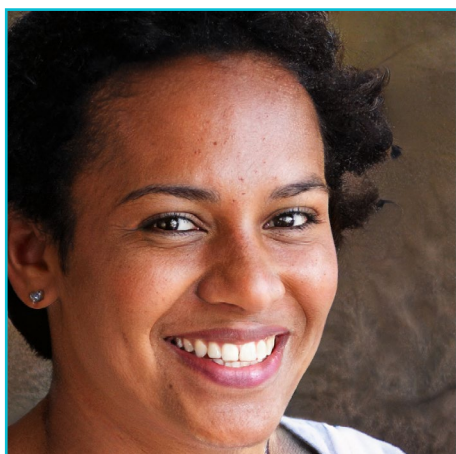
(Esther CN 1)

As well as providing a variety of meals and helping with loneliness, receiving the food service provides a social connection for Esther – whether via meals-on-wheels service or at the day centre. The drivers who deliver the meals are often volunteers with the service. They check in with Esther to make sure she is ok and ask if she needs anything. Going to the day centre is about more than the meal she receives; it is also an opportunity to chat and connect with people. She missed going to the centre during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Regarding the changes wrought by Covid-19, Esther notes that:

“Since the day centre closed down both here and the [other organisation] which I used to go to a lot as well, life got dreary. [It was] something to get up for in the morning [to get] out of the house and that kind of way. In the pandemic you just walked out and around the town and just walked back into the house again ... very little connection.”

(Esther CN 1)

Narrative 2



Nina, Foodbank

Nina is a 44-year-old married woman with three children who lives in a city suburb. She receives a food parcel from the organisation she is involved with. The organisation also runs a community-pantry style event biweekly and she attends this to add to her parcel. The parcel tends to be mainly full of tins and dry ingredients such as pulses. Going to the community pantry means she can choose what she would like, add fresh food, and means she can ‘scratch [items] off the shopping list’. For Nina:

“If there’s something available, I take that ... so if the opportunity presents, I’m delighted. Absolutely delighted to have that opportunity because at the end of the day, you know we’ve got to feed our family and we’ve got to be able to take care of things. And these are the opportunities that the [organisation] has provided for us.”

(Nina CN 2)

Nina considers that the food she receives helps her family financially:

“I think it’s very helpful ... on a financial aspect you know, a lot of people are having difficult times. And as I said, you know from month to month we don’t know how things will be. Because we don’t have a stable income, so that makes a huge difference for our family anyway.”

(Nina CN 2)

Covid-19 led to Nina and her husband becoming unemployed and experiencing financial difficulties. During the pandemic-related lockdowns, the centre was closed for a few weeks so they couldn't use the community pantry, nor collect their food parcel. The centre delivered to people within the 5km permitted radius for travel, but Nina lives outside that zone. Accessing food was thus difficult during this time. They had to rely on what they could purchase themselves:

"We just had what we had at home. We just have to get on with it. But yeah, I missed it shocking. It was tight stuff, was very tight at home. Children at home where now they're at school they're not eating you out of house and home. Where you're constantly trying to keep food in the press and everything else. Yeah, you'd miss it alright."

(Nina CN 2)

Now that her husband is employed again things have improved for them. Receiving the food that they do, means that they can use the money they save to go towards petrol for their car and school expenses for their children. Nina likes to cook and of the many benefits she lists about using the food service is how it enables her to make nutritionally sound meals that are appealing to her family:

"The full bag like of everything that you can eat immediately, or you can put something in the freezer that you have for the whole week. And I'm telling you can make a plan like for the whole week. Then you are eating like normal. I mean normal like something that I would usually spend lots of money [on] in [a] shop."

(Nina CN 2)

Using what comes in the food parcel as inspiration for her weekly meals, Nina writes up a menu with her children. Very opposed to food waste, she will chop up and freeze fresh vegetables and fruit to use at a later occasion. For example, Nina mentioned parsley and how:

"I have that in my freezer as well. Every tiny little leaf if it's not going to be in the bin, you know it's always like, even if it's for one spoon, it's going to be for a soup. It's going for something you know so."

(Nina CN 2)

Nina makes use of other strategies to combat waste. She talked about when there was a lot of eggs at the community pantry on a particular week. She took them home and made quiche as it could be frozen and used later. Sometimes she will bring food left over at the pantry to people in her community. For Nina, food going to waste while people are in need is particularly annoying, so she food shares with people locally:

“There is a couple of people around me that if there is a lot of stuff here then I pack bags and bring for them. They wouldn’t necessarily be on the FoodCloud, but it’s just because there would be say stuff here ... Now one gentleman is in his 70s and one lady, she’s 80 something. She just loves the bit of chat and stuff. So, I would drop stuff to them. Now with Covid obviously you can’t go in, but you’d be chatting to them from the front door. You know, here’s a few bits. And I think it’s the whole sense of that you’re looking out for each other.”

(Nina CN 2)

She went on to say how it is like ‘happy hour’ for the whole family when they get to enjoy the treat items that they receive, such as cake, especially as Nina cannot afford to buy food items like that herself. Nina also talks about how she can use the food she gets from the CVO to ameliorate feelings of shame or difference for her daughter, who was reluctant for the family to use the food service like ‘poor people’:

“And you see, it’s like a mix of that food and my food. And like I don’t have to go and buy something special because I get something special. I just like bring I don’t know maybe just this like sweet corn and sauce. It’s making her lunch complete and she’s thinking that she’s eating something I don’t know special. Like because this wrap is looking like from some kind of store.”

(Nina CN 2)

While Nina is very happy with the food she receives and the processes around this – collecting it and interacting with the organisation staff - she initially was reluctant to use the service:

“Honestly, I was kind of I suppose it is embarrassed because you feel like you can’t provide for your family. So that’s when you’re like Oh my God, you know am I that bad? But then you just have to get over yourself and go look this is helping you know. And it’s either that or stay at home and starve you know? So, at the end of the day, you just have to acknowledge the people who are there to help. But actually, asking them for the help is the hard one - like oh God are things really that bad?... I was just being foolish by just thinking it’ll go away. And it didn’t go away. So then when I came here it was just one of those things we just have to get over. ... Where I suppose a lot of people do feel like Oh my God. Embarrassed is probably the word to use.”

(Nina CN 2)

Due to her interactions with the CVO staff Nina began to feel comfortable about going to the organisation to collect food. Being made to feel accepted, feeling connected to people at the

organisation and the process being normalised by the staff and volunteers has made a huge difference to Nina:

“So, we’ve developed a relationship with the members of the [organisation]. And relationships are often developed around a table or around food. We’ve had some of the members of the [organisation] visit our home. We have lifelong friends with that centre you know ... I do believe that the relationships will continue. And it’s all based around communication. You know the food that was offered, the way in which it is offered ... But yeah, at this particular place the model that they’ve designed it on has been phenomenal to say the least.”

(Nina CN 2)

The social aspect of collecting the food is important for Nina:

“And like that, I’m coming in I’m lucky because I’m coming in and I’m meeting the girls and it’s more like a social visit. And I’m getting the stuff on top of it. I make stuff. I help someone else with the stuff I make. It has actually put me in touch more so with people in the community.”

(Nina CN 2)

Narrative 3

Helena, Foodbank



Helena parents four children alone. Welfare dependent, she struggles regularly and must be very organised with her limited budget. The food she gets from the foodbank helps her budget to stretch. Pre-Covid-19 she attended the foodbank once every fortnight; due to Covid-19 this changed to a monthly visit. The pandemic-related changes encountered included changes to how she received the food. Due to restrictions, she has had to queue up outside; this leaves Helena feeling self-conscious. The CVO staff and the relationship she has built up with the foodbank

coordinator has made Helena feel more comfortable going there. However, receiving the food in a black bag is an issue for her, as she feels it makes her stand out in a very public space as a foodbank user.

The pandemic affected how much and what type of food she received:

“Before Covid came in the [organisation] was very good because we used to get some extra bits and pieces ‘cause shops were donating. But since Covid came in everything was kind of limited. They stopped - we didn’t get Dolmio, and we didn’t get sugar off of them, you know what I mean? It’s just basic. It was just pasta, tea bags, cereal and beans and peas. That wasn’t down to them. That was because of the donations that they were being given. When Covid came in everything kind of clamped down ... You know when you’re so used to getting sugar and stuff like that and Dolmio sauce. You know what I mean? You’re using this as your routine food throughout the day like.”

(Helena CN 3)

A key factor in how Helena uses the foodbank food is that she combines it with a family member – they come together to make meals from the food. Also, she passes on food that she does not use to her neighbour who also receives a food parcel. Sometimes they swop food, to avoid food going to waste:

“If I only get the pasta and the Dolmio off them, and if I’m kind of down in money that week, my [family member] will step in. She will go ahead in, and she will buy the fresh meat that we need for that day. Like if they’re all going to be in ... she will buy the stewing beef and the carrots, and the parsnips. She will pay for dinner that day. So, the next day then she comes I’ll cook something. You know that’s the way we were working. We didn’t have anything, like it was hard. Then in the evening if they got hungry, they would cook the pasta and just have that. So, we were kind of coming up with mad ideas. I had my [family member] online to check, you know, see what we could cook ... We were coming up with kind of all different solutions of food that we’ve never tasted. But yet now they all love it ... all through Covid that’s what we did. We came together.”

(Helena CN 3)

Narrative 4



Andrew, Foodbank

Andrew is 52 and is not from Ireland originally. He has been in Ireland over 15 years and lives in a large town with his two children whom he parents alone. In receipt of a welfare payment and currently unemployed, he finds making ends meet consistently difficult. He receives a weekly food parcel from a foodbank. This is helpful as it means he knows there will be food in the press and it helps financially. However, he feels that the food is more suitable for a single person rather than for a family:

“Usually, it’s sort of like you know, like ready meals you know, ... like the curry with rice, with noodles. With you know chicken and sweet and sour or something. ... Meals that you just put in the microwave; you know. Sometimes you might get some packets of biscuits, tea bags. Wraps, you know ... There’ll be sort of like three or four ready meals, but they’re all sort of different. You know it’s not really for preparing a meal for a family. ... I’d have to add stuff to it. You know, boil up a bit of extra rice, add a bit of chicken to it. Stuff like that. ... so, like integrate it into something else you know put the chips on and you know yeah.”

(Andrew CN 4)

As Andrew is interested in cooking and being able to make a meal for his family, he can work with the food he gets.

Another frustration for Andrew is not knowing what he is going to get and the lack of choice. Food that he is not culturally familiar with, can prove difficult at times:

“Whatever comes in the bags I’ll just bring it with me. I never choose anything and it’s a bit I find like a bit difficult because maybe for Irish people that’s what they eat stuff like that. But sometimes I kind of struggle to see like what am I going to make with that food because it’s not what I’m used to buying.”

(Andrew CN 4)

Sometimes he’ll get the same items every week, and if it’s not something he uses, rather than waste this food he will pass that on to people he knows:

“Like the corned beef every week it comes. And there’s carrot in the glass ... And they always send every week, also, corn flakes and I wouldn’t really eat corn flakes, so I just ended up putting in a bag and giving to my [neighbour]”

(Andrew CN 4)

The organisation that Andrew gets the food through had to close for only a week at the beginning of the pandemic. So, the pandemic had a limited impact on his access to food. On occasion Andrew receives nonfood items in his weekly parcel. When his children were younger, he sometimes got nappies. He has also received cleaning and personal hygiene products which save him money as he then does not have to then buy those items. The organisation that provides his parcel are involved with the FEAD programme and through this he gets pencil cases and pencils for his children:

“Even every year from the foodbank there is a, you know the school case like there is pencils, pens, colours.”

(Andrew CN 4)

Andrew commented that he gets support from the CVO staff in terms of a listening ear and they also help him with filling in forms occasionally:

“Sometimes I go meet [name] at the [organisation] for us to talk and she helps me with a few forms and stuff.”

(Andrew CN 4)



3

3

B

C

2

2

D

E

Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)



FoodCloud



The Community Foundation for Ireland