

More than Food

**Surplus Food
Distribution
during the
Covid-19
pandemic**

Abridged Report



FoodCloud



The Community
Foundation for Ireland



Note

This report highlights the key findings of the research study
More than Food: Surplus Food Distribution during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is an abridgement of a more comprehensive and detailed report
of the study.

The full report is available at: <https://food.cloud/>

© Michelle Share, Perry Share, Caitríona Delaney 2022

Published by FoodCloud

Suggested citation

When referencing this document please use the following citation:

Share, M., Share, P. & Delaney, C. (2022).

More Than Food: Surplus Food Distribution during the Covid-19 pandemic:

Abridged report. Dublin: FoodCloud

<https://doi.org/10.25546/99583>

Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	8
Methodology	10
Challenges and Opportunities in SFD during Covid 19 - CVOs Perspective	
Challenges	11
<i>Moving food to people - new demands</i>	11
<i>New ways of operating - food parcels</i>	13
<i>Labour and logistics</i>	13
<i>Relationships with retailers - understanding needs</i>	18
<i>Economic Impact</i>	19
Opportunities	19
<i>Making and keeping connections</i>	19
<i>Adding value</i>	21
<i>Economic impact</i>	24
<i>Non-food items</i>	25
Community member perspectives on receiving surplus food	
Pathway to community food support	26
Composite narratives	26
Key themes arising from the research	35
Appendix	
Community Development Plan 2022-2025	37

Acknowledgements

Firstly, thank you to Dr Michelle Share, Principal Investigator [PI] (Trinity College Dublin), Dr Perry Share (Atlantic Technological University) and Dr Caitríona Delaney, for authoring the full report from which FoodCloud provides an abridged version, and for providing us with such important and thought-provoking research.

This research would not have been possible without the participation of the Community and Voluntary Organisations (CVOs) involved in surplus food distribution. We are very grateful to these organisations for their time and effort in explaining how they have managed surplus food distribution during the Covid-19 pandemic.

We wish to acknowledge the community members who participated in the study. They provided great insight into their experiences of receiving surplus food.

Thank you to Yvonne Fleming (Crosscare), Packie Kelly (Teach na Daoine FRC) and Nicole Dennehy (Ballyhoura Development CLG) who provided excellent ideas, discussion and feedback to the researchers as a part of a Stakeholder Reference Group.

This report would not have been possible without support through funding from the **Community Foundation of Ireland**.

Executive Summary

Over 30% of food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted throughout the supply chain, from agricultural production to household consumption, and food waste is responsible for an estimated 8% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. When up to 800 million people do not have enough to eat, food waste represents a missed opportunity to improve global food security. In Ireland, according to the EPA, 1.1 million tonnes of food is wasted annually.

Reducing food waste is a priority action at national and international levels in addressing climate change. The UN Sustainable Development Goal 12.3 has a target to reduce food waste by 50% by 2030 and this is reflected in national policy documents including the **Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy** and **Food Vision 2030**.

- Circular Economy Strategy commits to halve food waste by 2030. This includes increased support for surplus food redistribution.
- Food Vision 2030 says: [SFD is] “an important element so that the food waste hierarchy is followed and this can also play an important role in dealing with shocks in supply chains due to unforeseen events [e.g. Covid] while additionally offering positive social impacts.”

FoodCloud believes that SFD can have a transformative impact in supporting Ireland to achieve its target to reduce food waste by 50% by 2030. By inspiring, empowering and enabling a vibrant national network of food businesses, volunteers and community and voluntary organisations (CVOs) to engage in SFD, we can actively reduce food waste, raise awareness of the value of food and promote social inclusion in local communities across the island of Ireland.

In July 2021, FoodCloud invited research proposals to understand more fully how SFD works within local communities. The study focussed on the experiences of CVOs and the individual community members that they support and provided insights into the challenges and opportunities experienced by CVOs and their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic shone a light on the enormous potential of SFD to support the community work of CVOs. SFD can help to create and maintain community connections while also providing tangible support to community members through food provision and connections with other services. At the same time, the research has highlighted the high costs, resource deficits and other challenges faced by CVOs in developing and maintaining SFD programmes in their local communities.

By 'opening the box' of what happens to surplus food once it enters the 'second food chain', this research has shown that the work of SFD often involves much more than the receipt and distribution of food. It is also about more than people who experience food poverty. The study highlights how SFD has the capacity to meet the needs of many, if not all, in a community. The experience of the pandemic reinforced this potential.

While local SFD food projects will not 'fix' a broken global food system, they do provide examples of community-led and sustainable innovations that can be shared and expanded. This study highlights the great potential of SFD to become the basis for grass-roots climate action and for increasing the prevalence of transformative sustainable community food projects in Ireland.

Key Findings

- Covid-19 restrictions meant that communal eating was curtailed, so CVOs needed to find new ways to stay connected. Community food services, including delivery of meals, food products and food parcels, emerged as an excellent way to create and maintain contact with community members.
- This effort of connection resulted in new or expanded direct deliveries to community members of food items, larger food parcels and partially cooked or cooked meals.
- To do this CVOs showcased their resilience and responsiveness by establishing new 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.
- Participating in SFD is a lot of work and responsibility in the context of a sector where many are under-resourced and where food is often not their core work. However, when SFD works well it has the potential to provide important benefits to CVOs and their communities.
- Individuals may experience shame when reaching out for food support, however CVOs work very hard to design and deliver inclusive and community-building approaches to food provision to reduce the risk of stigmatising people.

Conclusions

1. **Surplus Food Distribution is hard work:** For a CVO to participate in SFD it requires 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.
2. **Effective SFD depends on relationships, connection and community:** The instigation, development and maintenance of personal relationships is central to successful engagement with SFD. 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. The idea of the *meitheal* reverberates in the work of the CVOs that participated in this study.
3. **The operation of SFD requires a certain level of infrastructure and capacity and has its costs:** There is a significant investment required for the 'logistics' of food movement and this can demand technological and infrastructural funding and resources.
4. **Inclusive practices are crucial to effective SFD:** It is important to CVOs that food assistance is delivered in a sensitive and respectful way. CVOs in this study made conscious decisions to destigmatise the act of receiving surplus food by making it available for all through open access shelves or community pantries, incorporating it into recipes with other ingredients, and reprocessing lower value foods.
5. **Circular Innovation, the 'second food chain' and the future of SFD:** Some of the ways that CVOs make use of surplus food points directly to the potential of a connected and circular economy. The practices of CVOs highlight not only the capacities needed to add value to surplus food, but also the potential of surplus food in building sustainable food communities.

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 (FoodCloud Hubs) in Dublin, Cork and Galway that distribute surplus from the food supply chain to CVOs

Since its inception in 2013 FoodCloud has progressed its technology platform for surplus food distribution and has expanded its network to the UK through a partnership with FareShare, to connect over 2,900 stores directly with over 7000 local CVOs across the country, and also to national food redistribution NGOs in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

A recent Social Impact Assessment of FoodCloud's overall activities was complete by KPMG and found that:

- On average, over 3,500 tonnes of food are redistributed through FoodCloud's channels in Ireland every year. Based on the tonnage of food redistributed and the shadow price of carbon, it is estimated that the monetary value of waste prevented annually in 2018-2021 by FoodCloud is €7.6 million
- It is estimated that FoodCloud distributed approximately €13.1 million worth of food to community groups in Ireland in 2021.

FEAD Programme

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.

Impact of 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's Hubs 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 surplus food than in 2019 to over 280 charities and community groups.

The Report

In July 2021, FoodCloud invited proposals for a research study on how community and voluntary organisations (CVOs) that avail of its services supported people through the provision of surplus food during the Covid-19 Pandemic. 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 in collaboration with Dr Perry Share, Atlantic Technological University. Dr Caitríona Delaney joined the team as a researcher.

This is an abridged report based on a larger and more comprehensive report, completed by the above authors. The abridged version was edited by FoodCloud and summarises sections of the report outlining the challenges and opportunities experienced by CVOs and their community members in distributing and receiving surplus food during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methodology

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.

Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods research design that comprised quantitative and qualitative methods:

- Stakeholder Reference Group that collaborated with the research team in discussions about the issues, assumptions and practicalities of the research.
- Research team engaged with FoodCloud's Research Group.
- Innovative user-focused survey platform OpinionX was used to surface 196 CVO thoughts.
- 22 CVO Key Informants participated in an in-depth semi-structured one-to-one interview using the photo elicitation method (participant-generated photographs were used to stimulate discussion).¹
- 12 Community members who received surplus food through a CVO partnered with FoodCloud participated in a semi-structured one-to-one interview using the photo-elicitation method.²
- CVOs that had participated in interviews participated in three focus group discussions.
- 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. This approach allows the findings to be communicated to a broad audience and simultaneously provides a picture of the group as a whole.³

¹Pseudonyms were used for all CVO Key Informants who are quoted in this study

²Pseudonyms were used for all Community members who are quoted in this study

³Pseudonyms and stock images were used for all composite narratives

Challenges and Opportunities in SFD during Covid 19 – CVOs' Perspectives

Surplus food distribution [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' their own facilities.

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.

This section provides insight into the distribution of surplus food during the pandemic period March 2020 – February 2022 and is based on the analysis of the interview data with 22 key CVOs informants.

Challenges

Moving food to people

New demands

In terms of the impact of Covid-19, CVOs experienced new demands from people whom had never previously accessed food assistance, for example, those dependent on formal and informal income from organisations that had closed, those who worked in the entertainment industry or construction, and older people who could not leave their houses as they were advised to cocoon.

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 users of their services, who may previously have received support from family and/or friends:

“The FoodCloud food doubled ... double the 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, Meals on Wheels)

For CVOs that operated food banks, the increased demand came from people in a variety of circumstances, such as those in low-wage casual employment 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 cope ... They had no disposable income. And yeah, people were 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, Community Food Bank)

CVOs, like Sonia’s below, 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 [...] 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, Youth Services)

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

New ways of operating

Food parcels

CVOs found that they needed to find new ways to operate. Many pivoted to food parcel delivery. As an example, Sonia's youth centre had to close at the onset of the pandemic but 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 food 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, Youth Services)

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, Disability Service)

Labour and logistics

The theme of 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 know-how; 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.

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 community employment participants through Tús & CE Schemes. 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, Community Food Bank)

Tús/CE community employment participants had been 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:

"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, Adult Day Service)

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, Adult Day Care)

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 them separate, and then I go on the road and deliver them”.

(Eithne, Adult Day Care)

Physical labour

CVOs handle large volumes of food. Food is often heavy, bulky and difficult to handle. 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 goodwill 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, Community Centre)

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, Community Centre)

Emotional labour and empathy

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 highlighted 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, Family Resource Centre)

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, Family Resource Centre)

Through her photo of how surplus food is distributed at her Family Resource Centre, 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 it’s 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, Family Resource Centre)

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, Family Resource Centre)

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.

Such systems can be quite complex and elaborate:

"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, Meals on Wheels)

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



Photo 5: Fridge #1 (Eithne OP2)

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, Adult Day Care)

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.

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:



"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, Community Childcare)

Photo 7: Roast dinner (Margaret CC1)

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, Family Resource Centre)

Economic impact

Involvement by CVOs in SFD has the potential to expose them to additional costs, for example for transport, facilities, or ongoing consumables.

While the food provided via FoodCloud might be low-cost or free, there are other infrastructural costs that CVOs must consider. Major pieces of necessary equipment like fridges, freezers and forklifts are costly for CVOs to acquire. Ongoing costs like insurance and consumables are also significant, and not necessarily funded by any external body.

Opportunities

This section focuses on the benefits of SFD as identified by CVOs. 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. CVOs also recognised that SFD can help increase awareness of the value of food.

Making and keeping connections

Keeping people connected

It was important for CVOs to maintain their connections with community members. For Dearbhla (Adult Day Service), 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, Adult Day Service)

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, Adult Day Service)

Food: A conversation starter

‘Food can be a great conversation starter’ (Peter, Mental Health Service). 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 it can just be lonely - and that’s the reality.”

(Feargal, Community Food Bank)

“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, Adult Day Care)

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 feel as if they’re out there. 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, Homeless/ Housing Service)

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 not supposed to be 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, Family Resource Centre)

“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, Family Resource Centre)

Adding value to surplus food

Alternative networks for redistribution

Many CVOs must grapple with too much surplus food and when the challenge is too great, food waste becomes a risk. They occasionally receive large volumes of food that have to be moved quickly or a product that they already have in large supply or cannot store. However, 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 use, you know, catering packs of whatever ... some organisations 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, Community Food Bank)

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:

"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 in 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, Family Resource Centre)

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:



Photo 14: Cooking for life skills
(Sarah HO1)

"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 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, Homeless/ Housing Service)

Creative practices

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 in you, I mean it’s going to become what it is ... it is what it is - it’s waste.”

(Justin, Homeless/Housing Service)

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?’

(Phelim, Meals on Wheels)

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, Adult Day Care)

For many 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 and prizes 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:

“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 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, Mental Health Service)



Photo 11a & 11b:
Treats
(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, Community Centre)

Economic impact

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.

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

“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, Disability Service)

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

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:



Photo 12: Sunflowers from donated seed (Peter MH1)

"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, Mental Health Service)

Community member perspectives on receiving surplus food

The perspectives of those who receive food from FoodCloud's community partner organisations are an important element of this study and help us to understand how SFD impacts on their everyday lives and wellbeing. This section comes from the analysis of the interview data with 12 key community member informants.

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.

Pathway to community food support

Six participants accessed CVO food support services after suggestions from family and/or friends, four already had connections 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, another received a public service pension and one was dependent on her partner as she had no welfare entitlements. Three participants accessed food support for the first time due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Composite narratives

The following short narratives have been developed through the combination of data from several interviews and are presented as a story from a single individual. Each composite is based on interviews with participants who were in receipt of surplus food from a CVO during the Covid-19 pandemic. This approach provides a picture of the group as a whole.

Narrative 1:



Esther, Meals-on-Wheels 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 depressing 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 and it's cooked. And you just feel hungry, you put it into the micro, 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 the 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 sweetcorn 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 swap 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, ready meals, you know,... like curry with rice or with noodles or 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 even, you know, a school case - like, 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)

Key themes arising from the research

1. Surplus Food Distribution is hard work

This research focused on the movement of surplus food after it has been allocated to a particular CVO and has 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.

The models of SFD that locate it at one end of the commercial food chain, 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 shed some light on the significant voluntary and paid work of many diverse kinds that is involved in the practices of SFD.

2. 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.

It is not cost-free for CVOs to engage in SFD. Even if the food is available for ‘free’ or for a subscription fee, it is still costly to store, transport and to package for delivery or distribution.

3. Effective SFD depends on relationships, connection and community

Something that came through particularly strongly in this study is that the instigation, development and maintenance of personal relationships is central to successful engagement with SFD.

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. From this, FoodCloud sees a significant opportunity to harness this uniqueness in the Irish CVO sector's approach to SFD.

4. 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 particular sectors of society who are marginalised face these challenges. Thus, food insecurity is often seen as a personal failing, 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. CVOs in this study 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 foodbanks.

5. The Future of SFD: Circular Innovation and the 'second food chain'

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'. 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. This 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.

There is 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 more innovative, transformative sustainable community food initiatives.

Appendix

Community Development Plan 2022-2025

Introduction

Reducing food waste is a priority action at national and international levels in addressing climate change. The UN Sustainable Development Goal 12.3 has a target to reduce food waste by 50% by 2030. That target is reflected in EU and Irish policy and legislation including the Climate Action Plan and the Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy. FoodCloud works to redistribute surplus food from a network of over 200 food businesses and 500 supermarkets to over 600 community and voluntary organisations (CVOs) across Ireland. These organisations work together at a local level to address the global issues of food waste and food security. In 2021, these CVOs redistributed 3,126 tonnes of surplus food, the equivalent of 10,004 tonnes of CO₂e emissions avoided and 7.4 million meals approximately.

In July 2021, FoodCloud commissioned research to understand more fully how surplus food distribution (SFD) works within local communities. The study provided insights into the challenges and opportunities experienced by CVOs and their communities, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research found that FoodCloud's network of businesses and CVOs represent a potentially transformative network in creating a more sustainable, equitable and circular food system for Ireland. The network has pockets of excellent practice where food businesses are actively engaged in food sharing, while CVOs use surplus food to meet the needs of their own communities and within a wider suite of activities such as connecting with local growers/farmers, establishing community gardens and delivering sustainability education and healthy eating programmes. By 'opening the box' of what happens to surplus food once it enters the 'second food chain', this research has shown that the work of SFD often involves much more than the receipt and distribution of food. At the same time, the research also highlighted the high costs, resource deficits and other challenges faced by CVOs in developing and maintaining SFD programmes in their local communities.

In conclusion to this study, the research team posed five key questions as FoodCloud works to continue to build our network, increase our impact and improve our services:

1. How can the extensive and varied work of the paid and volunteer staff of CVOs (and associated donors) be recognised, supported and celebrated in surplus food redistribution?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. How can we use SFD in a broader context to help to build more resilient, community-centered and effective responses to the unsustainability of current food systems that contribute to food insecurity and climate emergency?

Strategic Objectives

The key questions have been used to develop a 2022-2025 plan for FoodCloud's Community Development. The plan consists of 3 Strategic Objectives that will guide the work of our Community Development Team over the next 3 years.

1. Redistribute as much food as possible

Through the redistribution of surplus food, we want to inspire, empower and enable our vibrant national network of food businesses, community organisations and volunteers to commit to reducing food waste and increasing food security and social inclusion in their communities.

Action 1: Increase the volume, variety and consistency of surplus food available through our services.

Action 2: Grow the number of CVOs within our network.

Action 3: Continuously improve our services, both retail platform and Hubs, to ensure a fantastic user experience and an efficient donation process.

Action 4: Make our Hub service more accessible to CVOs nationwide.

Action 5: Collaborate with key community partners to innovate and develop new projects that distribute food in ways that can further reduce food waste and promote social inclusion.

2. Increase the capacity of our CVO partners

We will build the capacity of our CVO partners to rescue more food through training, knowledge sharing and showcasing best practice. We will also work to identify opportunities to support CVOs with the costs and resources required to actively engage in SFD.

Action 6: Increase the visibility of the diverse and creative ways in which CVOs engage with SFD in their local communities. This will include;

- Design, development and promotion of a series of textual and video case studies showcasing the incredible work that goes into successful SFD.
- Development of media campaigns to highlight CVO food heroes to the general public and other stakeholders.
- Development of stakeholder newsletters to support greater engagement and sharing of stories of community SFD projects across FoodCloud's network of stakeholders.

Action 7: Design, development and delivery of learning materials and online educational courses on food waste minimisation and food redistribution targeted at food industry, CVOs, and individuals.

Action 8: Creation of a webinar or workshop series providing support to CVOs in key areas relating to SFD. This will also act as a channel to gain feedback from CVOs to continuously improve our services.

Action 9: Development and implementation of a monitoring and evaluation framework which will enable FoodCloud to embed an approach for assessing the success of our services on an on-going basis and demonstrate and track impact. It will be a key input into improving service delivery, defining future strategic direction and supporting fundraising strategies.

Action 10: Investigate ways to support CVOs with the costs, resources and infrastructure requirements associated with SFD.

3. Advocacy & Activism

Harness the uniqueness of the Irish practice of meitheal in food sharing, and become an advocate for SFD as a practice that reduces waste whilst creating and maintaining community connection and has the potential to be used as a basis for innovative, transformative, sustainable and inclusive community food initiatives and climate action.

- Action 11:** Advocate for a favourable policy environment for surplus food redistribution that drives progress towards a 50% reduction in food waste by 2030 and supports the creation of a more equitable, sustainable and circular food system.
- Action 12:** Leverage our existing network to raise awareness, educate and inspire citizens to take actions that create a less wasteful and more inclusive circular food system.
- Action 13:** Through partnerships with industry, community and voluntary sectors, and academia we will continue to research the impact of our community based food sharing activities to inform and improve our decision making, policy recommendations and transformative activity.
- Action 14:** Establish a national annual SFD conference. Through this we will support our partners to work together to develop low carbon communities and further engage in Climate Action through surplus food redistribution. This will provide the opportunity for cross sectoral engagement, with the objective of creating connections, sharing insights, and increasing the understanding of the opportunities and challenges of surplus food distribution.



FoodCloud



**The Community
Foundation for Ireland**