

April 2023

## Introduction

This report is intended mainly for internal use. The information in it and interpretation are based on partners' reports, discussion, visits and observation throughout the project. It is only a partial report on RHE and is through a particular lens brought by the Programme Coordinator. Other stakeholders would have written different reports.

Coventry University will also produce end of project reports and these are conducted to a higher standard of independence, academic rigour and data collection than this report. Their findings are consistent with the comments in this report. There are omissions in this report about quite large areas of work because they will be better covered by the academic reports.

There are two extensions to Ready Healthy Eat. This report is about the main delivery phase as outlined in the application for a three-year project from March 2020 to February 2023. It is a report on the original grant of £786,846 and also the additional grant of £141,622 to address the Covid emergency period in 2020.

The two extension projects will make internal reports on progress and upon completion.

## Value for money

RHE has been good value for money. The partners were conscientious and well managed. Their purpose is to meet need not to make profit. They are used to operating efficiently on low budgets and collaborate with other groups with shared values in order to access cheap or free resources. It is difficult to imagine a business or public sector organisation that could have achieved a fraction of the impact of RHE with the same level of funding.

RHE would have been very good value for money if all it had done was produce meals. RHE produced 573,009 good quality meals and delivered them to people who needed them. If we had spent our entire grant on producing meals it would have cost £1.60 per meal. This would not have happened without the circumstances of Covid. It exceeds the target number of meals by 59 times. RHE has far exceeded expectations on this count alone.

It is likely that the social impact of RHE is considerably better value for money, though we do not have even an approximate value for this. Fifty-six people have found work, many of whom were on means tested benefits and were far from the job market. We do not have even approximate data about changes to diet as a result of RHE, but given the enormous cost of diet-related ill health it is reasonable to assume that RHE has had a significant cost saving impact. From the comments made by participants, including volunteers, it is likely that RHE has had a strongly protective effect on mental health. We do not have robust evidence for this but even a small change in community mental health will have very significant financial benefit. It is also likely that RHE has reduced public sector costs. For example, RHE is providing friendly meals on wheels to people discharged from hospital. People unable to go home from hospital because of lack of support cost the state over £2,000 per week.



NOW calculate the Social Return on Investment (SROI) of their work. It is a measure for all of their work not just a measure of their RHE work and may not be comparable to the other partners, and there is debate about how accurate SROI measures sometimes are, but it is nevertheless interesting to note that they calculate that every £1 invested in NOW generates £20 of social value.

One aspect of the work was probably poor value for money; the research and evaluation budget of £65,608 will probably not bring £65,608 worth of impact to beneficiaries. Gathering high quality academic data is an expensive task. We cannot make confident external claims without sound evidence but the internal and anecdotal evidence from partners and reflective conversations between partners has had at least as much positive influence on practice as the more formal research.

## Nutrition

Quality of nutrition is a very important objective in RHE and the project was originally devised partly to address the poor quality nutrition of ready meals often consumed by people in food insecurity. Coventry University will report on the evidence RHE has gathered during the project about changes to nutrition during the project, in addition to this report.

RHE has provided 573,009 meals against an original target of 9,650 (with only £141,622 additional funding for Covid). RHE has produced an astonishing 59 times the number of meals it set out to deliver. The huge number of meals produced was partly because of Covid where the partners suddenly stepped up to become emergency food providers to their cities. However, Hornbeam and Cyrenians are still producing enormous numbers of meals without extra funding. Between them, they produced 4,500 meals in the last 6 months alone. BHFP shut their very busy kitchen after Covid, rested and then reopened to focus on trainees who now produce about 300 meals per quarter. NOW far exceeded their meal target but produced fewest meals overall while retaining more of a focus on training. They are producing about 300 meals per quarter.

We cannot say with certainty that all of the RHE meals were 'nutritious.' This is partly because we do not know what 'nutritious' means or how to define or measure it. Looking at the data we have, we can say with some confidence that overall, people eating at RHE were probably much better nourished than they otherwise would have been and that some will make lasting changes to their diets. The RHE academic reports examine the data we have on this issue and there is no need to replicate that here. In this report we will pick out key learnings for us, with some illustrative data.

It turned out that 'improving nutrition' is not a simple matter. The issues that arose will be similar in other projects and the learning from RHE will be applicable elsewhere.

To begin with, partners submitted recipes for formal detailed nutritional analysis at the university. The results provided some surprises and wake-ups for partners (eg the vegan meals were too low in protein, which the projects noted and addressed) and were a starting point for the nutrition work. We recommend that community projects do undertake a nutritional analysis of meals. However, we quickly realised that we had more to do. The partners were quick to point out that the meals were one-offs. Cooks, sometimes volunteers, devise recipes on the day according to what arrives in the kitchen; they rely mainly on surplus food and can only produce meals as nutritious as the ingredients that arrive, which is not under their control. The amount of money allocated for ingredients per meal was less than 25p. The other ingredients arrive randomly through waste food supply chains and cooks devise menus on the day.

**LESSON 1** Many people in the UK are now dependent on waste food supply chains for nutrition. We need to organise so that high quality ingredients enter these supply chains.

**LESSON 2** Projects do not use set recipes so the cook on the day needs to be adept at devising healthy meals from random ingredients. BHFP have made posters for volunteer kitchen staff to help assemble a balanced meal from changing ingredients. We will share these elsewhere in the UK.

**LESSON 3** It is difficult to monitor nutritional quality with menus changing daily, even if you can define what nutrition means. We found this [quick free online tool](#) useful in some of the kitchens. Nutritional analysis is a good idea. Without this basic benchmark and nutritional targets, cooks do not know what to aim for and what is 'good enough.'

RFT challenged one of the partners because their puddings were high calorie. The partner was quick to point out that the meals were going to undernourished elderly people who ate too few calories in a week and they were deliberately adding calories to these meals.

**LESSON 4** 'Good nutrition' is determined by who is eating the meal and what else they eat during the week. Different people need different definitions of 'nutritious'. BHFP make nutritional guides for different groups eg noting alternative sources of protein for vegetarians. We will share these across the UK.

**LESSON 5** Variety and choice matter. Providing healthy food that people will not eat or that diminishes dignity is not ideal. Eg partners report that very little Halal meat enters the waste food supply chain but Muslims do not always want to be vegetarian. Find out what people are thinking and adapt what you do.

*"During October and November our worker Steph attended affordable food projects over a number of weeks to gather feedback on the Flavour packs. She attended the same projects over a number of weeks to that people who had taken a pack one week could feedback to her on another. Verbal feedback included questions about the name (does Flavour pack suggest it is the spices to add rather than the veg) and a mix between people who liked getting them as meal kits (eg with the rice, tomatoes and a tin of fish to turn into a pasta dish) and people who were more confident cooks who were happy to use them as part of their general cooking.*

*We also used a QR code to get people to provide feedback online. We got 39 responses this way. The feedback was mainly positive – 91% of people said they liked or really liked it. Two people that didn't said that the packs were confusing/they didn't understand how to use them. One person said that the contents were dry/chewy. Another person asked if they are vegan (they are but don't carry a label). We are reviewing the pack instructions to make sure they are as clear as possible.*

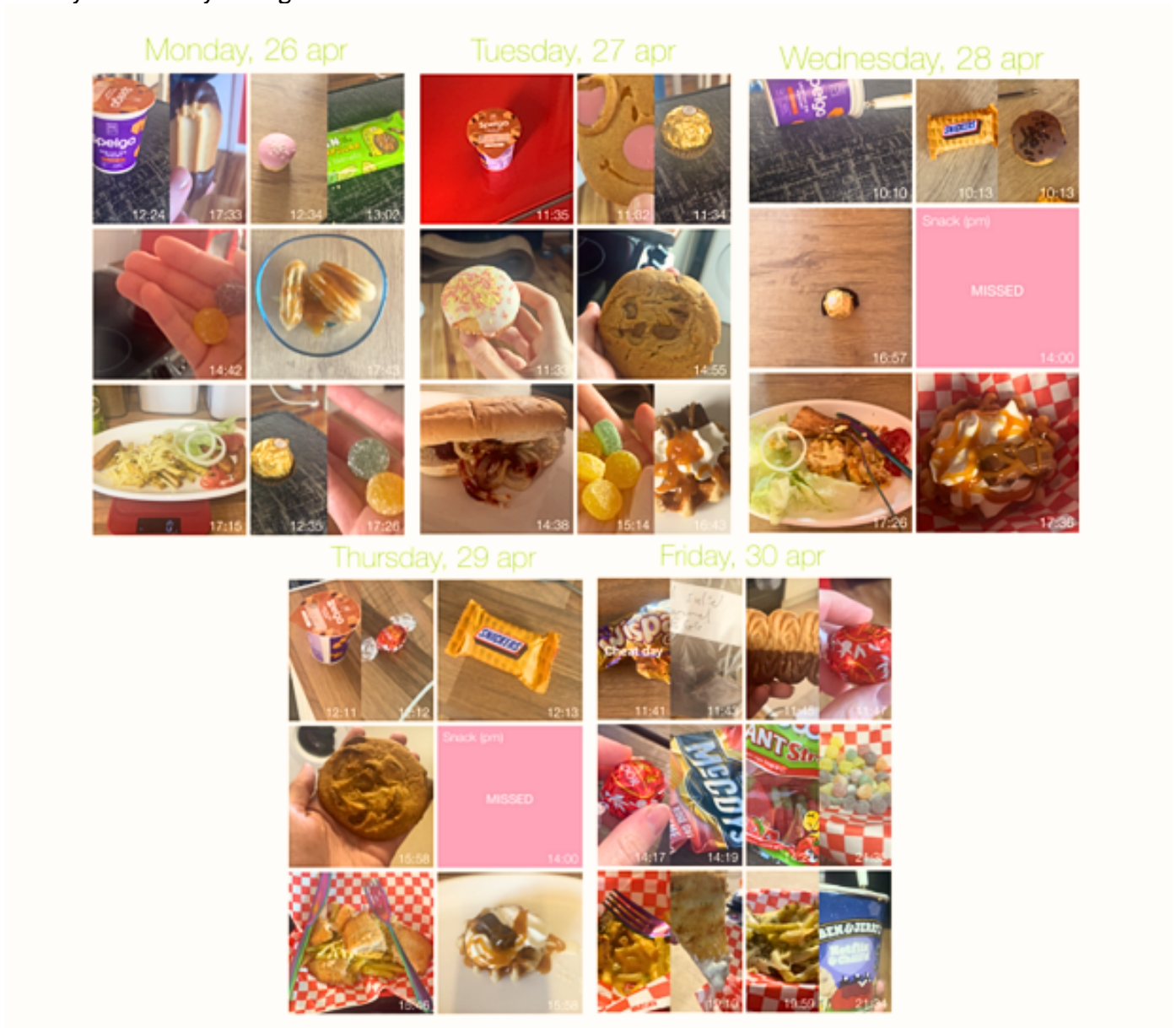
*A lot of the positive feedback mentioned convenience, food waste reduction and a good way of boosting veg intake." BHFP*

Format matters. The starting point for RHE was that people are eating takeaways, so we began with better takeaway ready meals. These insights led us to begin to investigate what people usually eat. Our findings were not thorough because we did not obtain data from most of the people using RHE. It was difficult to find methods that brought accurate data and participants were willing to use. NOW supported some adults with learning difficulties to use the [See How You Eat app](#) to record food photo diaries.





The findings astonished NOW even though they knew the participants and they have changed organisational practice. None of the participants ate any fruit and veg during the reporting period and they were rarely eating meals at all.



**LESSON 6** Find out what people you meet usually eat before planning nutrition. Elderly people might be undernourished and need more cakes. Others might have plenty of calories but not enough vegetables. Others (eg elderly fearing incontinence) are dehydrated.

*"Many of the beneficiaries of our meals are older citizens and low fibre intake is a particular nutritional issue in this age group."* BHFP

*"Working with the city's Ageing Well Partnership we sent out 1,300 dehydration awareness leaflets (along with a sachet of ovaltine) to older people in the city via the city's befriending services/meal projects and advice services."* BHFP

Overall, the research team and partners gathered poor evidence about what most beneficiaries usually eat during the week. This is a weakness in RHE.

**LESSON 7** We need to be talking about nutrition poverty not food poverty. If we collect data about the number of people skipping eating for the day as a measure of food need, we will not include people eating diets like the one shown above. The person with a diet like the one shown may not regard themselves as being in food need and may not present at the food bank.

**LESSON 8** Be realistic about what is 'good enough'. A vegan stew is a very big leap from the food shown in the photos above. A meal of sausage, mash and veg for the participant above might not meet the highest nutritional standards but will be accepted and is a very great improvement on eating at home. The starting point matters. We can aim for realistic improvements to nutrition rather than a perfect meal.

*"When delivering a batch of meals to one of the pantries an older lady explained how much she enjoys the meals as a contrast to her usual sustenance of sandwiches and bowls of cereal as she cannot afford to cook herself hot meals anymore."* Cyrenians

**LESSON 9** Nutrition is a social and cultural matter and will not be changed merely by delivering a new kind of meal. Support dietary changes; listen to preferences, offer accessible nutrition training, offer social eating to introduce new food, engage households, engage people in cooking. Providing a healthy meal that people do not eat is of no benefit.

*"One of the trainees said that the best part about trying new and different types of food from around the world was that they would never have tried them otherwise in their life."* Cyrenians

*"When I started the course I had a list of dish ideas, pickling and preserving items that I wanted to teach, however the trainees had other dishes they wanted to learn. I took this on board and we did a mix instead."* Cyrenians

*"We also ask trainees about diet changes as a result of what they learnt.*

- *45% said they are eating more veg*
- *27% said they are eating less meat*
- *45% say they waste less food*
- *50% say they are consuming less unhealthy/pre-packaged foods*
- *64% have tried a new food" BHFP*

The partners with most insight engaged community nutritionists. We did have access to university nutritionists but the nutritionists who know the reality on the ground, understand the lives of the diners, understand the cooks and access to ingredients are very well placed to support improvements. The partners meet whole people with all of their circumstances. They understand food need as part of a whole life which also includes employment need, social context etc. eg NOW engage the parents of adults with learning difficulties to consider nutritional change.

NOW worked hard to produce a healthy and tasty sustainably sourced vegan menu item in their social enterprise cafes which they offered at a subsidised rate alongside their regular less healthy offers. RFT strongly encouraged them to do this. Few customers bought the new dish and it was not a great success whereas their regular Irish lamb stew sells well and generates a profit. The vegan dahl was culturally misplaced.

**LESSON 10** Use community nutritionists and a whole circumstance approach for individuals, alongside menu analysis.

Asking whether the meals met prescribed nutritional standards was a good starting point but the question was too small. Once the whole system is under review rather than grams of protein in an individual meal, partners can look for the most impactful changes. For example, BHFP understood that many of their participants have no fridge and cooker, eat too few vegetables and want social contact. BHFP are presented with random short date surplus fruit and veg. They have set up a dehydration scheme with chop and chat sessions and provide dried meal packs with slow cookers. We will work with BHFP to share this model more widely and Cyrenians are already trialling this work with support from BHFP.

The detailed chemical nutritional analysis performed by the university nutritionist was technically good but analysed ingredients not a social situation. To make good decisions we needed social data alongside chemical data.

*"We are dealing with people not potatoes here."*

**LESSON 11** Some of our ideas about food are habitual. Think big, get data and ask the right questions. What's really going on here and what can we do about it? Continue to challenge and review. The role of the Programme Coordinator continually asking 'How do you know? How many? Why not? What are you going to do next?' was probably irritating at times but probably helped progress.

**LESSON 12** Do not under-estimate the importance of relationship. A need for comfort and care for personal preferences isn't necessarily at odds with providing for nutritional needs, but the love that food conveys might matter as much as the nutrients.

*"Having the home made frozen meals is so lovely. Of course, they taste good. They're nutritious. But more than this, I know that they have been made with care, and given with kindness. Eating them actually makes me feel... makes me feel loved!"* Cyrenians

*"We are converting waste food into social benefit."*

Some projects (outside of RHE) value the social outcomes so highly that the nutritional concerns are incidental. They are still doing valuable work.

**LESSON 13** Investing in changing eating habits will have a better long term effect than investing only in improving nutritional content of a meal provided by the project.

*"From the session with Fran (the nutritionist), I learnt how to read and understand food labels."* BHFP

*"We ran a training on nutrition for trainees & volunteers, including some beneficiaries, as part of a community-meal event on site. We had 20 people attend and the session was run by a local nutritionist who specialises in working in the community sector (meaning that she framed the training within a food insecurity/low-income context)."* Hornbeam

*"We have looked at ways of introducing healthier eating habits by cutting down on processed foods and learning about the amount of calories in their favourite takeaways. We are supporting our participants with cooking simple healthy dishes as an alternative to ready meals & takeaways."* NOW





**LESSON 14** Changing the approach to food of organisations, such as social care organisations, is likely to have the greatest overall impact long term.

*"The biggest legacy from this [RHE] project is what we have learnt on nutrition, it has been an eye opener in terms of what the value of food is and the nutritional value of food and we need to be teaching people."* NOW

**LESSON 15** Do not make assumptions. Project staff themselves have habits, attitudes about food and expectations of their clients. Be ready to challenge these.

*"We have been very surprised at how receptive our participants have been to the introduction of plant-based dishes and how beneficial their input was into developing a number of our new plant-based dishes which now feature on our standardised menu."* NOW

**LESSON 16** There are class and power issues at play and it is helpful to acknowledge them in the conversation, and build networks that include a wide range of interests and perspectives.

*"You getting your grant funding for middle class muddy organic vegetables! People round here like their pot noodles and if you had half a clue about their circumstances, you'd understand why."*

*"I'm afraid I am quite privileged. I feel embarrassed to go and talk to people at the food bank. I don't know where to begin. I'm an intruder in that community."*

During the extension period, we will share these lessons more widely in the sector.

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Hornbeam are a vegan co-operative linked to an organic farm. Their meals are unfamiliar to some visitors but are cooked and eaten in a social setting.



## Project delivery of meals

There were some agreed changes to project delivery which overall helped us to respond to changing circumstances and have greater impact. For example, in Brighton a new community group emerged that produces ready meals. They have received some of BHFP's funds to do so, thus strengthening their capacity, while BHFP's main RHE activity has been developing their dehydration work.

All partners value social eating but suspended this during Covid. All partners provided both meals and recipe bags with ingredients for people to cook at home during Covid and in some cases brought a social element to this by cooking together from home by Zoom.

Because of Covid the distribution of meals was on a much bigger scale using a wider and different range of delivery partners to the ones envisaged. During Covid the partners were also involved in distributing large quantities of ingredients as well as ready meals.

## Food sourcing

RHE has used 313.5 tons of surplus food. Food spend has been low. The average cost of ingredients per meal is not a useful figure because of the disruption to usual volumes and sourcing arrangements during Covid and in any case it varies between projects.

The use of waste food to serve people who cannot otherwise afford to eat is a stark example of the 'sticking plaster' nature of our work. People should not be too poor to eat and the food industry should not generate quantities of waste. Both of these problems are beyond our control and need policy intervention, so we do the best we can in the meantime.

The food spend was often used at short notice to meet immediate kitchen need on the day and to assemble a meal from the day's surplus food delivery. 'We pop round to Tescos next door to buy whatever is missing. Yesterday we bought gravy granules to go with the pies.' RFT are interested in good farming practice and short supply chains but we have had little influence over food spend because of the way food poverty projects need to source food.

Three of the partners use mainly surplus food. For Hornbeam, this is a deliberate part of an environmental commitment and they are still using 10-20 tons of food per quarter. Cyrenians are a Fareshare depot and most of their kitchen ingredients come from their Fareshare storeroom. BHFP lead a city-wide network of food poverty projects. They source all kinds of surplus food and play a strategic role in distributing the food, which they were doing on a large scale during Covid. This was a very important role in the city and BHFP were better placed to do it than any commercial or public sector organisation might have been. Their interest in food systems as well as food poverty made them unusually well-placed. Hornbeam also played this role during Covid but starting from a smaller and more local base.





Ready meals are an important feature in the use of waste food.

*"There is a lot of food that people do not want – having a community kitchen on site enables us to process the foods and do something with them. RHE helped us to learn to become creative with this." Hornbeam*

*"We would not have had people who could have taken beetroot from FareShare across the road and we turned it into pickled beetroot. Turning beetroot into food that people wanted – we have the trainees there to enable this; we have had the man power to do this." Cyrenians*

The location of projects matters: they need to be accessible to people in need but they also need to be near sources of food. Cyrenians is well located at a Fareshare depot. They can choose what they want before it goes out to projects and they can provide facilities to process and then redistribute otherwise unwanted ingredients, including short date fruit and vegetables.

RHE has brought about an examination of surplus food supply chains. We have covered it in more detail here than some other subjects because the situation is new, changing and underexamined and central to our discussion about nutrition; it needs attention and there is potential for improvement. The academic reports will cover this in more detail. RFT will continue these discussions in the extension period.

We have noted that:

1. Large numbers of people depend on waste food. This situation is new. Food banks used to mainly deal with one-off referrals but some now address the diet of people in long term need. In Brighton for example, food projects feed 5,000 people per week (which is much less than the number of people in food need).
2. It seems likely that food need is here to stay for the foreseeable future and therefore that investigation, planning and development is worthwhile.
3. Demand is going up. There are more people needing food support. Anecdotally, in some areas, the number of projects have gone up, especially during Covid.

*BHFP: "What I find interesting is that there is more surplus than ever being delivered but because more projects are seeing more people, there is a general perception that there is less food.*

*2019 = 1,090 tonnes*

*2020 = 1,211 tonnes*

*2021 = 1,309 tonnes*

*2022 = 1,982 tonnes"*

4. There is discomfort about serving 'rubbish' food to people in need and in providing a cheap dustbin for waste that should never have been created. Using surplus food is not a long term ambition but is the best we can do for now, to meet an immediate need.

5. Much waste food is not entering the food poverty supply chain. The best projects seek it out by being well-networked, identifying delivery nodes, collaborating and approaching suppliers. Fareshare and similar organisations are well-placed to distribute certain kinds of food waste but not other kinds of food eg from local suppliers, farmers' markets etc.

6. Food banks and Fareshare measure outputs by weight. They might not be receiving a good balance of nutrients. Eg many are offered more white bread and pastries than protein. They should consider thinking of themselves as 'nutrition banks' and monitor and try to address quantity of nutrition issued rather than tons of food. Food projects including food banks monitor outputs in kilogram units, not in nutritional units. The Very Well Fit tool that we used for monitoring meal quality would work for this purpose.

7. Food poverty projects tend not to meet food producers and processors and therefore struggle to identify some waste food. Eg they are often not talking to abattoirs, packhouses etc. There is work to do to introduce these networks to each other. Some of this needs to happen at a small grassroots level.

8. Kitchens need good cooks who can devise tasty food at scale immediately from random ingredients. This often requires training, which RHE has provided.

9. The best systems have good communication and physical infrastructure. Poor people will be better nourished where there are Whatsapp groups, warehouses, freezers and forklifts.

10. Food projects buy in ingredients at short notice to match the day's random surplus delivery. This means that they pop next door to the supermarket and therefore do not get a good deal either environmentally or financially. Buying in to ensure that the delivery is nutritionally balanced, accessing wholesale prices and making longer term deals with environmentally good farmers could be better handled higher up in the waste food supply chain, ideally in a way that is owned and controlled by the projects needing to supplement supplies. The end users could aggregate their existing food budgets to do this.

11. The best projects are providing a unique role in supply chains. They can source and quickly use or distribute short date and random food because they know who can use what, at what scale on what day of the week. They have flexible and diverse outlets to meet every supply eventuality eg they make ready meals, drive vans, run pop-up stalls, dehydrate, make kimchi, make ingenious recipe bags (eg using short date pineapple, eggs and cream cheese in the same recipe!), provide pop up snack tables etc. No other player in the food chain is doing anything like this. Our current food systems produce

12. Food supplies to projects that depend on them are insecure. If surplus food supplies dry up or fluctuate then people literally do not eat that day. Surplus food supplies are volatile.

*"Our supplier told us that surplus food has plateaued and there is not much more available." Hornbeam*

*"Supplies of surplus food in the city continue to be very variable and demand for fresh produce in the city's food banks and meal projects is very high. As we established the dehydration project to deal with gluts of surplus and the 'surplus surplus' we don't want to use produce that can be distributed to people fresh so in the last few weeks (when supplies of fresh produce across the food system have been fluctuating) we have had less produce to work with." BHFP*



13. It is a skilled job to take care of health and safety and shift waste food quickly.
14. Network and collaborate. The more communication and cooperation the better. At worst, food poverty projects compete with each other for insufficient supplies of surplus food. Their need is desperate: without the food, their friends and neighbours may go hungry. Tensions are likely and need managing.  
  
*"As a 'vegan' space, we get a lot of interesting vegan surplus products like oatly yoghurts, kimchi, even vegan sushi."* In Hornbeam's networks, some suppliers do understand and address their needs.
15. Scale matters. Some projects can handle a consignment of 5 tons of cauliflowers, some can handle a tray of sandwiches left over from a wedding. This needs to be understood and signposted in networks.
16. Some activities work best at different places in the supply chain. This needs to be understood and planned for eg dehydration might work best at the top of the supply chain so that we are only dehydrating food that could not be used anywhere else.
17. In a collaborative network, specialism is helpful eg one organisation can make and distribute ready meals (which might enable community cafés elsewhere), one can do gleaning and share bulk gleans, one can run a warehouse, etc. Food suppliers need a single point of contact in the sector, not multiple calls from different volunteers. Some food surplus arrives in catering size packs and needs to find its way to projects serving large households or running kitchens.
18. Storage is a problem. Many of the smaller satellite groups of the partners use temporary and pop-up spaces with insufficient storage. This affects diets.
19. Power is held in the wrong place. What people eat is largely determined by what supermarkets want to throw away. Ideally, supply chains will be owned and controlled by community nutritionists and community food projects. There are cases where the bigger waste food distributors are deciding which projects get which food. Where this is happening, their intent and knowledge of the sector matters; are they fostering collaboration? Do they know where Halal/vegan/baby food is needed? Are they enabling new food banks to set up right next to existing ones or are they using their influence wisely in who they choose to supply? Choices about which projects to supply made by distributors may have significant influence as demand exceeds supply of food.  
  
*"Our delivery this week was a palette of energy drinks. How am I supposed to make meals from that?"*
20. Nutrition at food poverty projects matters more now than it used to. Previously, the typical food bank user needed three days of emergency food because of a temporary crisis. Now many people can never cover their meals and need long term nutrition.
21. Surplus food (even 'junk' food) can be used as a means of delivering valuable social benefit; people arrive for free food and then engage in community activity.
22. Framing matters. When we talk to people in need who often feel ashamed and have low self esteem, it is both accurate and supportive to say that they are helping the environment by using surplus food.



23. Good supply chains are more important than proximity to farmland. Rural food poverty is very poorly supported. Households looking out over farmland may be among the hardest hit by food poverty.
24. There is work to do to map and understand supply chains to see where investment, communication or change is needed. Waste food supply chains are largely ad hoc and neither food industry, farming nor food projects know the route of food in and out of their organisation beyond their immediate contacts. There are probably easy wins to improve quantity and quality of food if we had a strategic view – eg if most community food projects had a cheap second hand freezer, would the supply chain be able to handle much larger volumes of fresh veg? If the main distribution centres were making and freezing ready meals would we be able to address nutrition and waste more efficiently than moving ingredients to projects (that often serve people who do not cook)? If nutrition were monitored instead of weights, would we be able to develop relationships with key waste producers (eg abattoirs, oily fish processors) to meet identified gaps?
25. Packing disposal and disposal of inedible food that has been delivered can become the problem of the food project not the company that caused the problem. Hornbeam for example spent £2,400 on waste disposal this year.
26. The partners did not provide data about the impact of apps like Too Good to Go or Olio but this might require attention in some areas.

In Brighton and London, RHE contributed to improved networking and supply chain development for surplus food for food poverty projects. BHFP and Hornbeam partnered other organisations such as Felix and the Real Junk Food Project. We do not have accurate data about the impact of this work but it is likely to have improved diets beyond RHE, particularly during Covid. We think this kind of regional strategic work on planning waste food supply chains is very important for improving nutrition for the large numbers of people suffering the health consequences of poverty.

### Local, agroecological and organic food

Faced with increasing numbers of people who struggle to eat at all, it is difficult to make a persuasive case for spending more on agroecological ingredients. RHE has used 313 tons of surplus food. Use of food otherwise destined for landfill is arguably environmentally better than producing additional food on local organic farms.

Despite the emphasis on waste food, all partners did make some efforts to source local and high quality food. Apart from BHFP we do not have clear data about how much food was sourced in this way; it is hard to monitor in a dynamic kitchen and some food is not traceable. Hornbeam source from their partner project which is an organic farm, BHFP are involved in local food network schemes and Cyrenians have a small training farm.

*"I mainly got the skill of cooking with what I have and making a meal out of nothing; seeing a meal from what is there instead of planning meals in advance and working hard to get all the right ingredients. In the past, I thought that to be 'good food' everything had to be expensive, organic, the best of the best, and recipes had to be followed to the dot. I don't see it like that anymore. It's more sustainable and healthier to work with what you have, than to strive for unrealistic goals."* BHFP participant

*"We have been buying more from the cash and carry to try to minimise cost."* Cyrenians

*"For the Community Kitchen classes, we purchase food using our sustainable purchasing policy which prioritises local ecological producers for fruit, veg and eggs. We purchase organic dairy via supermarkets (most cost-effective approach) and other dry store items via Infinity, a local organic wholesale company. At this time of year there is less produce available from our community food growing spaces but we are busy prepping and planting for the next season."* BHFP

The Hornbeam arrangement is interesting. Their community cafe and urban food security organisation is long term partnered by an organic farm. There are many advantages to this. The urban project understands and values organic produce. *"We get approx 0.5 tonnes of Organiclea surplus produce each quarter."*

Unlike the other partners, NOW buy most of their food to serve set menus because they run commercial cafes and are not primarily a food organisation. Their business model is different: they generate trading income and go shopping and can therefore choose what their participants get to eat. Other projects may have lessons to learn from this model.

NOW have been interested in local sourcing and have started to take an interest in provenance but their food purchasing choices are beyond RHE. During RHE they have considered sustainability issues. We have not seen strong evidence that their procurement choices have been transformed. Their ideas have certainly been influenced by partnering with food projects, which has been a new experience for them. It is possible but not guaranteed that in the long term NOW's approach to both nutrition and provenance will change significantly. If change on that scale occurs, it needs to be led by the organisation's own changing priorities and plans not by the demands of a relatively small and temporary grant funded project. RHE has provided time, impetus and resource to trial ideas eg offering one sustainable dish in their cafes.

During RHE, RFT has considered how (and why) food poverty projects might access agroecological food and had talked to other partners about this. There are multiple problems:

1. Whose desire are we meeting? The (often) privileged people who think everyone should eat organic food? Or the people in food need for whom organic is not (usually) a priority? Who should choose what is on the menu and how funding is spent?
2. Organic and small farmers need to be properly paid and often are not. Their produce is usually more expensive to supply.
3. Supply chains do not work well for food poverty projects (eg pre-ordering).
4. Organic farmers and supporters tend to move in different cultural and geographic spaces and networks to food poverty groups. Even if they offer free organic food, they do not know how to welcome people who need it; engaging in communities of need is a skilled job which organic farms are not usually good at, even 'community farms'.

During RHE, working with other partners we have trialled a model that we think does work and some very high quality food is entering RHE through this model, including very high quality meat from a partnership with the Pasture Fed Livestock Association. This model (which we might call LUSH, Linking Up Supplier and Hub) is unusual in addressing all of the problems above and we think it could be a game changer for some smaller projects. In LUSH, the (usually well-meaning and well-off) customers of an agroecological farm that direct retails are asked by the farmer to 'buy an extra one for someone that needs it'. They often do, and the good quality farmer increases turnover. The farmer is not good at distributing this with dignity to people in need but partners a food hub who use the food as part of their wider social project in a community of need.

Cyrenians are receiving organic meat using this method and adding social value to it in their cooking sessions. The meat is supplied by Peelham Farm. Although the volumes are small so far, the development of this model is a breakthrough and might resolve a long term aspiration of the local food movement if we can encourage uptake. We will promote this model during the extension period.

The other success story for sourcing local food was through a government-funded scheme to pay farmers to harvest their surplus fruit and vegetables to enter the large scale distribution schemes. Feedback Global provide data on food waste which indicates that much good quality food does not leave the farm. Cyrenians received some of this produce via Fareshare in Scotland. Much of this food waste at farm level is from supermarket suppliers at a scale unsuitable for individual food projects and requires large scale distribution infrastructure. This scheme enabled increased supply of healthy food to food poverty projects.

Projects that are used to processing and distributing unexpected surplus food might also be able to play a unique role in the local food supply chain, if they can link in, eg to create a market for gluts in organic supply chains.

*"Shaws Fine meats donated 5,000 frozen pheasant breasts to us that would have gone to waste had we not had space to store and utilise them in our meals. We have turned them into terrines, stews and casseroles and it is now known as 'wild chicken' at the cook school."* Cyrenians

*"Cyrenians holds the franchise for FareShare in Central and SE Scotland, we have well developed relationships with large vegetable producers and our food education team is in the early stages of trying to develop relationships with smaller farms. FareShare will often receive vegetables quite close to being unusable and often the large volumes in which they are received means that they cannot all be redistributed before they spoil. RHE has funded us to trial dehydrating this and distributing it with slow cookers to pantries."*

As mentioned above, hundreds (or thousands?) of community food projects pop round to their nearest supermarket to fill gaps in the day's surplus delivery. They are paying retail prices for environmentally poor food. We think that the buying-in to supplement gaps in the day's surplus provision would be more efficient if performed higher up the supply chain, by waste food distributors. These big players are better placed to access wholesale prices and could work in partnership with local or organic farms.

It was not an objective for RHE but all four of the partners are now offering farm visits or farm work to their clients. To some extent this has been encouraged and supported by RHE.

*"Five trainees went to the December visit to Stanmer Park to visit Fork and Dig It (a local CSA growing project) and the Food Partnership's Wellbeing Gardens and food growing project"* BHFP

Hornbeam was already linked to a like-minded organic farm and some people in food need have been to both sites. For example asylum seekers are undertaking practical language courses at the farm and eating together. Cyrenians participants have been working on their sister farm during RHE. NOW has signed us as a partner for a new three and a half year funded project to train their clients in horticultural skills at a CSA. Farm visits are novel for some staff as well as clients, although staff have been working with food in the catering sector for a long time. The farm visits may gradually change the way that NOW thinks about food quality or sourcing. *"I was quite shocked to see the pigs on the farm and think about our sausage rolls. I hadn't put pigs and sausage rolls together in my mind until then."*



## Training

178 trainees completed training during RHE, against a target of 176. This is a remarkable achievement given the difficulties of entering a kitchen during Covid. Of these, 56 found paid employment. The trainees were not evenly spread across the projects. BHFP and NOW did particularly well with training and NOW did outstandingly well with supporting 23 people with learning difficulties into paid employment. Most of the training was condensed into the second two years of the project because kitchens were shut during Covid. Even when they reopened, there were spacing restrictions and much work to do to restart mothballed activities, at the same time as volunteers were returning to work and staff were going off sick or seeking new work opportunities after furlough. We did not expect partners to meet their three year training targets and it is a remarkable testament to their skill and commitment that they did so. The mental health and work needs of some of the people they trained were probably particularly acute following lockdowns.

Some partners have not supplied sufficient or consistent data about starting points for trainees or long term outcomes for us to make strong claims about the impact of training. Patchy data collection was caused partly by Covid, partly by how CAWR worked and partly because the delivery projects were busy and (understandably) did not prioritise data collection, especially at entry point during Covid. Where projects have collected data, it has not always been comparable because they have used different monitoring methods and have had very different people as trainees. This is discussed further in the academic report, along with all the data we do have, so we will not write at length on trainees in this report.

*"We have some internal learning re gathering progression data because we set the initial surveys up to be anonymous as we thought it might help people to be more honest; however this has made it impossible for us to compare people's post course scores with the bit of work on progression data. Whilst both bits of information are valuable in their own right we could have understood more if we had set this up in a different way."*

The reports that we do have show that vulnerable trainees both gained skills and particularly valued the social and emotional support from the groups. An impressive number went on to paid work from challenging starting points (eg with learning difficulties). Anecdotally, the trainees highly valued the relationships they made with caring trainers and in some cases this has been life changing.

*"Of the 58 surveys we sent out, we got progression data info from 45 people. Of these:*

- 10 trainees were in work*
- 14 have begun volunteering (6 of them at the Community Kitchen)*
- 23 people have attended another course or class at the Community Kitchen."* BHFP

Against that, one partner commented that the desire to evidence 'progress' for individuals sometimes misunderstands need. Some of their clients will be in lifelong difficulty. Making their week more cheerful without them 'making progress' is a valid aspiration. Not all trainees were seeking paid work or able to work. We did not set targets for numbers of trainees going on to paid employment. The partners have not taken a strong interest in each others' training methods, except for the impressive all round and ongoing support that NOW offer to trainees to help them into paid work, from which the other partners have learnt. They have also learnt about how and why to train adults with learning difficulties and BHFP have offered specialist groups, following NOW's lead. The original aspiration from RFT was that the people in food need would themselves go on to cook for their peers. There are some examples of this having occurred and of trainees going on to gain paid employment for the partners themselves. The meals that trainees cooked have mainly been eaten by people in food need. We do not have clear evidence however about to what extent trainees were recruited directly from the people arriving in need of food support, or whether they were recruited through separate channels.

*"Our 3 month follow up survey work shows that 14 people have begun regular volunteering as a result of coming on the course - 6 of them with the Community Kitchen, 4 on other FP run projects eg Gardens and 4 with the Real Junk Food Project surplus food café which we attended with some of the participants as part of a learning visit. The Community Kitchen volunteers include people who had been on the RHE trainee course and came back to volunteer at a related course eg a future Food Foundations course, Chop and Chat or Brunch Bunch."* BHFP

The partners are reporting that social support and mental health support is an important aspect of the sessions. Anecdotally, participants in food need are increasingly experiencing mental health problems which increase their suffering and make solutions less accessible. We are hearing reports of community food projects and their volunteers feeling overwhelmed or traumatised by the level of mental health difficulties they are facing. RHE partners do not seem to have been caught off guard by these needs.

*"The main challenges faced on this cohort have been the personal challenges of the group. We have focussed a lot on increasing confidence in the group as they were all facing huge life-changing challenges individually. Providing the trainees with a safe space where they feel comfortable and with a little bit of support and encouragement the development of their mental health and wellbeing has benefited them exceptionally well."*  
Cyrenians

*"30 trainees report feeling happier since the course - 66%  
22 trainees said they have made new friends as a result of the course - 48%  
15 trainees say they feel less lonely since the course - 33%"* BHFP

There were examples in each of the projects of people describing the relationships as being more transformative than the cooking skills.

*"I really liked the people who work for the BHFP. They became role models for me, and I needed that at the time. They are kind people who are great at their jobs, and they make everyone – participants and volunteers – feel welcomed and valued. It's a special thing to create and share."*

*"At the heart of it, it's the people, the care, the warmth, and the sense of community."* BHFP

Anecdotally, it appears that the community food projects attract exceptionally good people. This is what makes them function so well in their communities.

### Social impact

The university was tasked with measuring and reporting on social impact and so it will not be examined in detail in this report.



Cyrenians

Hornbeam  
were pleased  
to resume  
social eating  
after Covid



## Income generation

The academic reports will cover this in detail and duplication is unnecessary. Income generation was a weak area in RHE. None of the partners met their individual target. Overall they raised £9,654 against a target of £22,330 and none of them has transformed their economic model.

All have experimented with new ways of generating income and all have taken an interest in other partners' models and trials, examined further in the feasibility study. If RHE has had any significant impact on economic models for partners it will be long term and hard to measure as being a direct result of RHE.

*"We did not meet income generation targets BUT, have some solid ideas for going forward with this and many, many learnings on balancing capacity with income generation (where it doesn't lead to so much additional work that it doesn't end up generating much income)." Hornbeam*

Covid delayed or disrupted income generation plans, for example because cafes were shut or the focus was on different work.

*"Timing has been the key issue re any attempts to work out if selling this product is viable as we didn't start development properly until later in 2021 meaning we ran out of time." BHFP*

*"We will sell ready meals at a competitive market price to local offices marketed as an easy lunch option." Cyrenians, from bid. Soon after RHE began, offices closed because of Covid.*

NOW worked hard to produce a healthy, tasty and sustainably sourced menu item in their social enterprise cafes which they offered at a subsidised rate alongside their regular less healthy offers. Few customers bought it and profits were lower than budget.

Some of the trials have shown ideas that other groups might be able to replicate effectively even if they are not a mainstay for the RHE partners themselves. We will share these during the extension period. For example, using training kitchens for free support to vulnerable groups and at other times charging for cooking experiences has been profitable eg in one case, training a Syrian refugee to become a paid cooking trainer for fee paying groups. In some cases small-scale income generation activities eg in running a pop-up restaurant, has covered costs and met other needs eg work experience for trainees. For organisations with a social purpose, finding income generation activities that also meet their other objectives is helpful.

One interesting consideration which we hadn't anticipated is that projects are using surplus food to make meals. If they sell it out of the food poverty system, they are reducing the amount of food available for low income households and there is not enough to go round. This is particularly important if the sold food includes more precious ingredients like fruit and vegetables. Some donors stipulate that food donations cannot be sold.



## Working with the research partner

We have some doubts about whether the research work had sufficient impact for beneficiaries to justify the resources required to do it. There are several reasons for this:

1. Academic research is expensive and we questioned the value for money of the results in terms of impact for beneficiaries.
2. Managing the data collection took enormous amounts of unpaid time from RFT staff, delivery staff, partners and beneficiaries as well as the paid work for the university.
3. The purpose of the research was unclear. If it was a learning activity intended to improve good practice then learners' needs and engagement needed to be the starting point rather than data collected. If the purpose of the research was to scrutinise fair use of grant money then the researchers needed to collect different information, to be more separate from the grant holder and to report to the funder rather than the grant holder. If the purpose of the research was to gather evidence for policy change, then we needed to begin by determining whether evidence would influence policymakers and if so, which evidence and how to approach policymakers. The researchers took on a very open question; what was the impact of RHE compared to the intended impact, including unexpected impacts?
4. The external role of the evaluators had some inherent conflicts. On the one hand, there is a role for an independent body who will give an objective, evidence based view. On the other, the evaluator is a client of the grant holder and the grant holder needs to manage their work and is liable for its completion and success. The research team needed a lot of management and direction from RFT to get the work done and yet needed to be independent of RFT.
5. Not all of the work we expected from the university by now has been delivered yet. Many deadlines have been missed by the research team. RFT does not have a point of contact at management level. This was not conducive to the researchers being independent of the project.
6. The university management processes behind the researchers were frustrating and time consuming. For example, when researchers left their posts for new jobs, the university did not have a plan for how to deliver the research contract. Both key researchers left their posts before writing up the work. Allocated researchers were sometimes too busy to deliver the work. Handover midway through a project was problematic.
7. Delivery partners were busy and did not always share the data they had already collected. The data they were each collecting for their own work was not comparable because they used different systems.
8. Covid was disruptive. The researchers could not visit and understand the projects. It was hard to collect data without being at the project. It was hard for researchers to understand partners because Covid came at the start of the project.
9. We wanted evidence based conclusions about social impact. Inevitably, much data was individual and narrative and open to interpretation when seeking to find meaning. Measuring social impact impartially is inherently difficult.
10. The main output from the research will be three reports. They have not yet been produced. They are late. When they are, even with the (unusual) extension to RHE after the time that they are published, it is difficult to make use of them to create value proportionate to the £57,000 they cost to produce.
11. Participants had no voice in the purpose of the research. Their role was to provide data to others with more power, who decided how to use it.
12. Delivery partners were not clear about what data was needed by when or for what purpose. It would have gone better if the researcher communicated a clear research purpose and plan with timetabled actions and then stuck to it.

*"A general reflection on the whole project is that we've struggled to know what to capture/monitor and how to share that. Coventry University's research team were helpful with ideas on how to go about this but we've struggled with the capacity to systematically capture evidence/data/feedback."*

The Programme Coordinator struggled to steer the research work through the obstacles and was constrained by the contract and the difficulty in controlling external staff, even when they failed to deliver their agreed targets. On the one hand, the research team need to be independent and challenging. But they were too removed to make sense of the work without a lot of input from the Programme Coordinator, who was also their client, meaning that they were in practice not entirely independent. Without sufficient steer from the Programme Coordinator, they were not clear of their purpose but with too much, they were not independent.

An implicit assumption about external evaluators is that they are checking and reporting on proper use of grant funding. This role is correct and we welcome it. However, if any of the partners had been misappropriating funds or fabricating their reports, the researchers were not actually in a position to catch them out and they did not have or plan for this explicit brief. If we want this role to be undertaken, we need a different method to do so. The second contract with the research team was managed differently to the first in that the work was explicitly intended to improve practice. Prospective practitioner learners were engaged in a reflective process with RHE partners, they were the experts and the researcher was tasked with managing the process and writing up the learning from it. We do not know whether or not learners were actually influenced by this experience. Assuming that they were, then this process is much cheaper and more effective to run and can be done without expensive academic input and can be done early in a project while there is still time to adapt to the lessons. To some extent the RHE partner meetings informally used a process of critical reflective enquiry and this may be one reason why the partners reported good learning from the partnership.

We were aware that by commissioning research from a university we were talking about equity while investing in a system that permits enormous differences in what people are paid per hour. We would prefer to be using grant money to pay fair wages to all, including cooks in community kitchens, food bank workers, food project officers and researchers. Wage differences are hard to avoid. We made a small (perhaps tokenistic) gesture to address this by insisting that 'lived experience experts' were quite well paid for their time in working with researchers and presenting at the academic conference. In a small way, we hope that paying people with first hand expertise may also convey recognition that *they are* the experts and researchers can only report on participants' experiences.

One positive aspect of the research was the researchers' improvements in working with participants who sometimes do not have access to a voice. For example, elderly or marginalised people did not return lengthy small print paper surveys. The projects went on to work with the researchers to develop simple mobile phone surveys. At first, the researchers did not know how to adapt their focus group techniques for adults with learning difficulties but working alongside NOW, they improved. These kinds of adaptations will enable marginalised people to communicate to policymakers, via research reports.

In some cases, data collection was valuable. Some of the key moments in the project were where the partners were startled by data that the university team asked them to collect. The partners have been prompted about how and why to gather their own data in the future and what they have learnt from being alongside the academics might be as impactful as the reports on this particular project.

Another positive aspect of the research work is a shift in approach of some of the partners to data collection. When delivery partners report, RFT has been asking 'how do you know?' and seeking an evidence-based approach. In some cases, the experience of working with the research team may cause partners to continue to collect data more effectively.

*"A big learning is to integrate more of this monitoring into the core of our work - much as the NOW Group do."*  
Hornbeam

The partners' attitude of listening, reflecting and changing was as important in making improvements to the data itself. They needed data to make improvements but the data would have been useless without their constantly exploratory and open approach. Because of their culture and purpose, they are continually looking to participants to see what they really need and how to improve their support. The partners were all open to learning and change and not 'set in their ways'. When data did emerge that challenged their previous assumptions, they were quick to change their work accordingly.

*"We thought that vegan meals were healthy. The analysis showed that some of the meals were low in protein. We are now adding more pulses."* Hornbeam

The Grant Officers' approach was helpful to the research process. There was a sense of trusting, intelligent, interested inquiry. Where grant holders feel the need to impress grant funders and cover up mistakes or changes, the research reports they commission and publish are more likely to be marketing reports than accurate accounts that lead to learning. RFT organised a small scale reflective discussion with a small group of funders and evaluators about the experiences of different stakeholders in running evaluations. Some of the difficulties RHE had with research are common but rarely discussed. We plan to hold a second discussion in May with the funder. RFT is reviewing how to conduct research in future work that does challenge, provide accurate evidence and scrutiny, and respects participants' time and expertise with an impact that is good value for money in terms of impact for participants.

### **Covid and 'Cost of Living'**

By coincidence, RHE began at a time of unexpected community and food need which put many households into crisis. The partners were very well-placed to respond to community emergency because they are well-networked, flexible, understand their communities, and are well-respected for their skill and integrity (and therefore trusted for donations and volunteering). They can deal with multiple complex needs, not just a single issue, and they are motivated only by serving their communities - not by profit, politics or other agendas. The partners were all good at knowing who was in food need and those people already had good access to the projects - they felt safe enough and at home enough to be able to go when they needed support. Between them they stepped up and provided an enormous number of emergency meals during Covid. This is not a small achievement and perhaps undervalued. The fact that people turned up and asked for help in large numbers says much about the organisations. They were better placed than business, the army or local authorities for the pandemic response.

*"A big lesson learned has been the ability of community organisations and people to address nuance and complexity in a way that councils and government cannot."* Volunteer

These kinds of community organisations could be seen as vital to the UK's emergency and health infrastructure and invested in accordingly. Well-run community organisations deserve recognition as protective emergency resources and need investment to be ready for the next event.



The partners gained recognition in their areas for their work during Covid, which has in some cases made it easier to scale up their future plans (eg Hornbeam's relationship with their local authority during Covid made them well-placed to develop a food network across the area).

*"Without RHE funding, we wouldn't have had the funding or even been mentally prepared to provide ready meals at such short notice. We provided over 40,000 meals over the 2 years of the pandemic. But it is also about how we made & distributed these meals - we always had the long-term sustainability in mind and were identifying ways to create longer-term solutions, which we are now exploring & developing, like food pantries & coops, like tiered payment schemes for ready meals. The work we did through RHE helped us build a strong food resilience network, made up of small, independent food 'hubs' and mutual aid groups. This meant we were in a very good position to be commissioned by the local authority (London Borough of Waltham Forest) to work on long-term food resilience in response to food insecurity locally. As part of this, we are setting up a Food Partnership (learning from our Brighton and Hove partners). This is the legacy of the RHE funding."* Hornbeam

Despite these two crises, RHE partners delivered nearly all of the original targets and far exceeded the target for number of meals produced. This is a remarkable achievement, especially since their buildings and training kitchens were shut for long periods and staff and volunteers were sick and transient. The impact of Covid is covered in the academic reports and other documents eg [this one from BHFP](#). Knowing their communities, being trusted, being dedicated to community service, being well-networked and collaborative and being nimble and adaptable were key features in making an effective response.

Covid provision had an enormous impact on all of the partners. They worked extremely hard during the pandemic to pivot to online support and training, distribute food, identify vulnerable isolated people, deal with staff sickness, welcome fluctuating numbers of volunteers, warehouse and deliver large amounts of food, address serious safeguarding concerns, etc.

The partners are experiencing 'Cost of Living Crisis' as neither 'a crisis' or mainly about 'cost of living'. It is an inequality crisis which barely affects some people and wrecks the lives of increasing numbers of other people, including many who have never had to find their way to support organisations before. It is not a temporary 'crisis' but a desperate ongoing lifestyle where income cannot meet basic needs.

It has affected partners in several ways:

1. Volume of demand has rocketed.
2. Cost of running services has increased. Donations and grants have decreased.
3. Community food projects have become a front line safety net. Provision of other services has reduced; it is harder to refer to a community nurse/probation service/youth mental health/hospice at home etc. Public transport is weakened, there is no access to NHS dentists, housing benefit does not cover rent.
4. The type of people requiring help has changed. Previously, long term food insecurity affected mainly people with additional challenges in their lives eg street homelessness. Now ordinary families with otherwise well organised lives cannot afford to eat properly. They are not used to asking for help and do not see themselves as 'food bank users'. Many people in food need are now employed, often with caring responsibilities or children, and are time poor.

5. We are seeing changes in the type of food need. Previously, a one-off referral to cover a short term hiccup was sufficient. Now, households are unable to pay for essentials over a long period. Food groups therefore need to consider long term household nutrition and diet rather than one off food parcels. We are seeing more people without access to cookers and fridges who need appropriate food over a long period.

6. We are seeing changes in the depth and complexity of need. People used to arrive in need of a food parcel. Now, more people arrive with profound life crises. These are quickly compounded if not resolved. Problems are both caused and worsened by cuts to services such as Sure Start, Probation, community mental health, NHS, public transport, etc. A problem in one area, such as a wait for an operation, can quickly have knock on effects which are hard to recover from, such as a loss of work, eviction and depression; people's lives are unravelling. The community projects still have an open door and are becoming the front line and attempting to provide a safety net for complex needs. Some volunteers are feeling overwhelmed. Partners are offering a free meal. People are coming in with multiple crises including extreme mental and physical health needs. Volunteers in the food queue are not just serving a meal, they are meeting people who have become psychotic, suicidal, a danger to their children, without electricity supply to their houses, etc. NOW's services for example have become confounded by needing to address a greatly increased number of safeguarding issues. Other public and voluntary sector organisations that used to provide specialist services are also overwhelmed, under resourced, shut or harder to access (eg for people who cannot afford a prescription or no longer have a bus service to reach them).

Projects that are ostensibly about food provision are doing their best to address serious life needs. eg Hornbeam had to run training for volunteers about how to work safely with people in extreme mental health breakdown in the food queue, BHFP are working with people who are housebound and were previously left unfed, NOW are supporting couples with feeding babies where parents have learning difficulties. In addition NOW has a third crisis of disrupted EU funding and suspended government.

In all cases, partners' determination to meet the needs of their communities has driven survival. Staff and volunteers are sometimes exhausted or traumatised by the level of needs they are faced with. In some cases these are needs that we think should be met by increased household incomes and reliable public services, or needs that would not have arisen if public services had functioned better. We are seeing a similar situation all over the UK; food projects are overwhelmed with visitors' social, health, financial and mental health needs.

### **The role of community groups in preventing an immediate crisis from becoming an irretrievably ruined life**

Through the provision of catering training in a social setting, RHE partners have been able to provide some support for participants. This provision is expensive, skilled and requires suitable premises. People in food need who visit many community food projects will not have access to mental health and social support that they need. A well-timed intervention like this might make the difference between someone having a difficult few weeks and then being able to manage life and seek opportunities or their lives unravelling in a way that is very hard to recover from; from a large fuel bill, to food poverty, to shame and isolation, to anxiety and depression, to marriage breakdown, job loss and eviction. We do not have any more than anecdotal evidence that the catering training and social eating did provide a buffer between a difficult spell and a cliff edge for some households, but in designing Cost of Living interventions in the coming months, leaders could consider which interventions at what point best protect against worsening situations for people for whom food poverty comes with a raft of other financial and social stresses.

*"Oh definitely. 100%. Yeah, I am so grateful to them [Cyrenians], because if it wasn't for them, then I would still be in that space [unemployed]. And then, you know, it makes me think, well, when would I get out of that? Would it be another 10 years down the line?"*

*"...so it's about looking at the whole, not just sticking a roof over somebody's head, you know, or not just putting a plate of food in front of somebody or making sure somebody's not going hungry. It's about a holistic look at people." Cyrenians*

*"In some of the trainees, you can noticeably see a change in mindset with the desire to progress more. This relates to not only progressing their skills and abilities but also progressing their social skills and having a positive impact on their local community." Cyrenians Jan-July 2022 report*

The RHE partners were tasked with providing nutritious ready meals to people in food poverty. Time and again, what they actually did was to provide food AND a safety net of care.

If properly funded, community groups are well-placed to develop innovative whole-person responses. They are well-placed to offer dignified, flexible and responsive services because they are embedded in communities. They are well-placed to support networks of collaborative support. They are also well-placed to offer very good value for money. They are skilled and experienced and understand their clients, their communities, trends and how to identify the most effective interventions.

## **The partnership**

All four partners valued the partnership very highly. Partnership learning was not an explicit objective of the original bid, but has been a key outcome. It is likely that all four partners will do different work in the long term as a result of their partnership learning. The results of this have been so striking that RFT's next funded project is about forming unlikely partnerships. The RHE partners were already well networked in their own geographic areas and interest groups. They benefited from working with UK partners that they would not otherwise have met.

*"The enormous amount of learning from other projects; being able to bounce ideas off each other in a supportive environment." Cyrenians*

*"We've really enjoyed and learnt from being in this partnership. All of the partners have an approach that shows what it means to support and believe in people in moving towards the work/skills/leisure destination they want to go. This has helped our confidence that this approach (which is what we also seek to do) is the right one.*

*It has been great working with Clare and Jade and especially thanks to Jade for her work leading the partnership with patience and positivity and doing such a great job of pulling together some clear messages from across the work. Both highlighting what is happening/good practice and providing thought provoking suggestions as to what this means/what next.*

*Everyone has been generous with their time and experience, supportive (I particularly remember some of those Covid lockdown meetings talking about really practical challenges re delivering meals but also a feeling of emotional support from others whose pandemic experience was similar). One of the nice things is that all the people who were involved at the start are still there now meaning we have been able to develop as a team. So many partnerships have never-ending personnel changes which makes that trust development harder. I have no doubt that I will continue to engage with all of the organisations."*

*"It is vital to look, listen and learn from others if you want to be the best you can." BHFP*

*"The six of us were quite different characters, counties of origin and ages, in different locations, doing different work with different participants. And yet, we found much in common with how and why we were tackling the work. Our roles and perspectives were sometimes more similar to each others' than to our immediate colleagues who had different roles in our own organisations. You can't keep going in this work without supportive relationships. We spent very little time on the partnership meetings overall but they were very valuable." RFT*

*"I felt a very deep respect and admiration for each of the project leads. They worked with complete integrity and dedication. They were compassionate and wise. There was no sign of egos or competition. They listened and put the needs of their participants first. Apart from enabling good work to happen, this has also inspired and supported me in my work in a deep way that will influence me beyond RHE." RFT*

The role of RFT in making the application, selecting and introducing partners, managing the work, drawing out shared meaning and reporting to the lottery did save the delivery partners time and allowed them to get on with what they do well. This level of work is demanding and would have prevented even the larger partners from making an application.

*"Thanks Clare for doing the application for the top up funding, Jade for getting the Cost of Living uplift and the extension – not having to do these applications ourselves meant time to concentrate on the frontline work." BHFP*

*"We seriously underestimated in terms of our costing how much time would be needed for the reporting (quarterly seems to come round very quickly), the evaluation and the all partner learning sessions (which especially as I presented at a few took quite a bit of prep as well as attending) – this point is not so much about how the programme was delivered but maybe something to consider if creating bids/partnerships in future is to tell your partners how much you will expect in this area so they can build it into the budget." BHFP*

The activities that contributed to the partnership learning are:

- RFT inviting mixed partners to the project at the beginning
- RFT hosting Zoom meetings throughout the project that had a friendly and exploratory tone. These took up very few of the overall hours but achieved much.
- A tone of supportive enquiry rather than 'checking up on', trust and integrity.
- Two day visits to three of the projects.
- The rise of Zoom use.
- A Programme Coordinator with wide ranging experience in the food and farming sector who was able to identify innovation and key themes.
- Putting people with similar job roles and project objectives together from different organisations to share experiences. Their colleagues in their own organisations had different job roles. RHE staff felt supported and inspired by each other.
- Excellent, consistent staff with shared values. All of the delivery and RHE staff have been in place throughout RHE. Relationships have formed.

*"What helped was keeping everyone connected with quarterly meetings; bringing people together in such a warm, positive way that encourages knowledge-sharing, curiosity on each other's methods/learnings; finding the threads in the work that join us; encourage in-person meet-ups." Hornbeam*



RHE began during Covid and some of us didn't actually meet until well into the project. The coordinator was recruited by Zoom and we worked in geographically distant locations.

Some examples of long term impacts of the partnership working are:

- RFT is interested in sharing the understanding of how to work with diversity food poverty in the agroecology sector.
- Hornbeam set out as a small community group and have stepped up and are now interested in developing a borough-wide network with strategic objectives.
- BHFP are running cookery classes for adults with learning difficulties, having seen NOW's work.
- Cyrenians are trialling dehydration guided by BHFP. BHFP have identified that it is most efficient to dehydrate at the top of the supply chain because the preferred option is to distribute as much fresh veg as possible by offering it to every community group in the supply chain. BHFP have innovated with the dehydrating method and have invested in understanding health and safety, recipes etc. but are not at the top of the supply chain. Cyrenians are at the top of the supply chain and are well placed to engage with Fareshare thinking nationally because they are Fareshare distributors. This is very valuable partnership work which may have far reaching benefits and could not have occurred in a different kind of partnership, eg between similar local groups.
- All partners noting NOW's expertise in working with disability eg in taking an all round approach to employment (vocational training funded by RHE is only one component of effective work).
- NOW have developed an interest in nutrition and in food sourcing. Eg They will continue to work with RFT in a new project and NOW trainees will be working on an organic farm.

The delivery partners also collaborated with other organisations in their local areas and strengthened capacity and networks. In some cases, RHE enabled our partners to step up their work and that in turn enabled them to take more of a leadership or supportive role towards other local groups, or to share ideas from the other RHE areas with groups in their areas.

*"We have been sending out the freezer meals on a weekly basis in large quantities to 4 local pantries." Cyrenians*

*"Learning from others & implementing their learnings has been valuable e.g. inclusivity & training with people who have learning difficulties: we have partnerships with local MENCAP and other agencies working with vulnerable young adults. They have structured placements with us and come in to do food preparation for the community cafe. Also many learnings from Cyrenians in terms of running supper clubs (which our community cafe is now trialling as additional income generation) and from Brighton & Hove FP in terms of everything that they do!! especially the income generating cooking workshops, which we will trial!" Hornbeam*

For RFT, a key observation was the value of making unusual partnerships. For example, RFT has been mainly interested in agroecology and to partner with organisations who are interested in poverty and social care has provoked some significant discussions in our organisation that might contribute new conversations or shifts in our networks. RFT has been sufficiently startled by this as to set up a future project that is based on forming unusual partnerships.

## Food sovereignty

Food sovereignty is concerned with people's right to define their own food and agriculture systems (Nyeleni). It is a term used in agroecology and so is of interest to RFT. It is a term sometimes used by peasants in the Global South demanding access to land to ensure food security. UK work to improve access to land in the UK for marginalised groups, eg young black aspiring farmers, is valid. However, it makes no difference to the lives of nearly everyone who cannot eat properly in the UK. Throughout RHE we have asked ourselves what the term might mean in relation to a UK food system where many people have minimal control over their food systems but do not have land access as a route to food security, and nor do they want it. In the context of the lives of people coming to RHE activities and the UK food system, what does food sovereignty mean?



Is this food sovereignty?  
(Hornbeam)

Our partners implicitly shared strong values about choice, dignity and respect. We noticed that they listened, responded and met the whole person, as they came. This culture of dignity and equality probably had a more powerful impact than any specific 'food sovereignty' objectives could have done.

People who cannot eat properly in the UK do not particularly identify as 'food insecure' because not being able to pay for food is inseparable from not being able to pay for fuel bills, rent, taking on more paid work hours alongside caring responsibilities, anxiety, their teenagers' welfare, etc etc. We are meeting people who have had a catalog of diminished control over their own lives; asylum seekers, benefit cuts below survival levels, insufficient access to health care, no provision for disabled dependents etc and the consequence is often deep structural injustice, irrecoverable situations, hopelessness and low self confidence. To respond to that with 'how do we improve your food sovereignty' misses the mark. 'Food sovereignty' is RFT's agenda. Increases in sovereignty have by definition to address participants' concerns, not the concerns of external agencies.

A more appropriate question is 'How do we offer our resources (which happen to be about food) so that you have more choices in your lives?' At the micro level, there were many examples of partners listening to participants' immediate food choices and preferences.

*"When I started the course I had a list of dish ideas, pickling and preserving items that I wanted to teach, however the trainees had other dishes they wanted to learn. I took this on board and we did a mix instead."*

Cyrenians cooking trainer

*"The community cafe ask 2 customers for verbal feedback on the meals once a week. This isn't systemically recorded but feeds back into the core cafe team and influences the type of food they prepare."* Hornbeam

*"We had phone-call check-ins with our beneficiaries whom we deliver meals to. They gave us some feedback on the meals which resulted in us tailoring some of the meals to specific individuals' needs/desires as much as possible. One beneficiary systematically texts us her feedback on the meals every week - it's always appreciative but also on occasion, provides useful feedback on what does & doesn't work with her digestive system."*  
Hornbeam

*"The community cafe ask 2 customers for verbal feedback on the meals once a week. This isn't systemically recorded but feeds back into the core cafe team and influences the type of food they prepare."* Hornbeam

*"One of our beneficiaries, whom we have been delivering meals to for the last 2 years, died this quarter. He was extremely frail and unable to cook for himself. He was heavily reliant on our twice weekly meals and also received help from family and friends. He sometimes gave us feedback on the meals verbally/on the phone - he specifically asked for meat meals whenever we had them and we secured some surplus meat ready-meals from elsewhere for him on occasion in order to accommodate this. We were very sorry to hear of his passing but also glad that we could help him at the end of his life."* This is a noteworthy comment from Hornbeam, a project committed to veganism.

Learning to cook and learning about nutrition in itself increases food choices. There were examples where partners also listened to wider household situations and addressed those, where they could. For example, in enabling young adults with learning disabilities to begin to cook at home, they recognised that they needed to work also with parents to change home patterns. There were occasions where NOW intervened with protective parents to encourage them to have the courage to allow their adult offspring to catch the bus by themselves for the first time to get to the cooking training. Questions about food, transport, parenting, control of their own money etc could not be addressed in isolation.

*"G has said they feel proud to be a part of The Hornbeam. They've slowly started opening up to us and taking on more responsibility. They've been volunteering with us since July 2021 and we seem to be a source of stability for them as they continue to battle with sobriety. At The Hornbeam they find peer-support from another volunteer who has lived experience of alcohol addiction too."*

For some people at NOW, getting a real job was a very important life goal. Following RHE catering training and with support from NOW, some succeeded.

*"D joined the NOW Group during Covid when she took part in online cooking sessions, once we returned to face-to-face delivery D signed up for a Loaf Academy and achieved a Level 1 qualification and a paid job. D's husband was encouraged by her progress and has also joined the service, he attended NOW's job club and football team. His confidence & self-esteem grew, and as a result he applied for a part time job and was successful with his application."* However, for D, a job in any sector might have been equally important as a job in catering. Some RHE catering graduates did go on to jobs in other fields.

For other participants, such as people in need of emotional support in Brighton, job seeking following training was not a priority and was not pushed. So empowerment is affected by the immediate ways in which projects listen and respond to people's day to day preferences, which in some cases led to increased confidence and self esteem. The community projects have particular strengths in responding with kindness, offering social fabric, reducing hopelessness and increasing self esteem. This is one important aspect of 'sovereignty'.

There were examples where RHE began to change food provision in ways that increased choices about food available eg in seeking an increased range of ingredients or menus. There were also a handful of examples of participants moving into roles where they had increased organisational influence eg in becoming organisational employees, trainers or co-op members. These were particularly from Hornbeam, which has a solidarity model. NOW also employes trainees in its own social enterprise cafes.

*"I learnt a lot about the web of food in the city. I understand much better now how food is distributed, how many different organisations are dealing with food, and how food is linked with poverty." BHFP trainee*

*"I also feel part of a lovely community, and that I can now help others, and there is a special value in that for my mental health." BHFP*

*"This quarter we provided paid work opportunities to 2 previous trainees to facilitate the cooking at our weekly free community meal (People's Kitchen) and have linked them up to other cooking/sessional work opportunities in the community." Hornbeam*

*"Each training session was supported by 2 volunteers including one person who was a previous Food Foundations Trainee." BHFP*

*"One trainee has been provided with a paid work opportunity with ourselves as cooking lead for our free community meal (funded by the local authority). This is a sessional worker role but will provide her with paid experience to build her confidence in leading in community cooking. She is a local muslim woman with some struggles around depression and anxiety and does not have any other paid work, so this opportunity has huge potential to boost her confidence and experience in leading sessions like this. We're providing her (as we do with most of our trainees) with emotional support through regular check-ins related to the work she's doing with us and also finding further connections into the community for her. For example, when she feels confident enough to, we will put her forward as a sessional worker for a wellbeing project a partner organisation is running." Hornbeam*

*"Another trainee is joining the Gleaner Community Cafe team as a paid coordinator once a week." Hornbeam*



*"We have found that the most organic, natural next steps for some of the trainee volunteers who are interested in staying involved in community food/finding paid work in it, is to join our rota of 'sessional workers' who are kitchen leads for community meals or other projects, day coordinators for the cafe etc. We share this rota with other community organisations who are looking for sessional workers to run workshops or community meals for their own projects. This development, made possible by RHE funding, has led to us looking to develop this further into creating a network of community meals & training for people to run more free community meals in Waltham Forest, reaching more people in need of a social eating experience." Hornbeam*



There were few if any examples of significant changes to the underlying power structures that determine control of supply chains or the causes of injustice. These are mainly global and policy issues that are beyond our control. There were examples of operating outside of these systems however, for example in Hornbeam partnering an organic farm and offering opportunities for people to work on the farm.

Towards the end of RHE, partners began conversations about advocacy. People with lived experience of food poverty are often missing from platforms where provision for food poverty is discussed. We began to think about how to improve this, for example we will invite RHE participants to the stage at the Coventry University conference where the university present their research about RHE. We are hoping that the 'keynote speaker' at this academic conference will be a catering training graduate from NOW who has learning difficulties. We will look for other opportunities of this kind and consider how we can better support people to speak out if they want to do so.

*"Northern Ireland minister Steve Baker visited our Head Office to meet with participants and their families to hear about the work we do." NOW*

*"Danielle one of our participants attended the Special Olympics Ulster Leaders Forum to speak about her personal journey of growth & development with the NOW Group." NOW*

Similarly, when the chair of the National Lottery Community Fund asked to meet RHE, we wanted her to speak with, not just about, kitchen trainees, if they wanted that (which she did do).

There are so many manifestations of access or denial of choice for RHE participants and so many different needs for each person that we are unable to offer any clear formula for food sovereignty in these settings except a strong value of respect throughout every interaction and transaction, which will create a culture where self confidence and choices tend to increase in all areas of life. This is hard to measure or regulate for. RFT and the agroecology movement still has a long way to go with these questions. RHE has provoked a wider body to begin to think about what food sovereignty really means. We still have a long way to go and much to learn.

We must listen. 'How do we redirect our resources to open more choices for participants?' is a more appropriate question than 'How can we get you to meet our goal of increasing your food sovereignty?'

### **Sharing the learning and mentoring**

Most of the work to share the learning from RHE will happen in the next 12 months and we have a small budget to pay RFT, partners and other practitioner experts. Our thinking has developed and we have more to say now than we did earlier in the project. Our ideas will be evidenced or challenged further by the university reports.

When the project was devised, Can Cook were appointed as mentors to the RHE partners and there was a budget to pay for their time. They withdrew however once RHE began. Their learning needs were met by their own contacts and by contact with each other. We appointed Tamar Grow Local (TGL) as alternative mentors and they contacted each of the partners to review their needs. We asked RHE partners what mentoring support they wanted and their responses were limited. The mentoring budget has been diverted to supporting projects outside of RHE. For example, led by TGL, we are producing a simple technical toolkit for producing ready meals.

We have held meetings and run seminars throughout the project eg training the CSA Network and Open Food Network in food poverty issues, speaking at conferences and running discussion groups. Some of the university work engaged practitioner experts in reflective learning sessions (see separate report). The Programme Coordinator has regular meetings with other organisations in the sector to consider where we need to go next, for example on the Food Learning Forum's committee.

## Financial reporting

Each delivery partner has reported quarterly against a budget broken down by all the application budget headings. Please let us know if you would like to see these. Where they have identified an underspend or generated trading income, this has either been reallocated to existing budget lines (eg extra food spending) which they have reported on, or with permission from the Grant Officer, redirected to new planned and budgeted work, which partners continue to report against.

Two delivery partners have agreed outstanding spending still to complete. BHFP have £4,228 to run cooking training for adults with learning difficulties, to write a guide to dehydrating food and to present a webinar on dehydrating food.

Cyrenians will have £17,418 to spend on setting up a dehydration and chop and chat sessions at Fareshare.

RFT have withheld the remaining payments due to Coventry University until their work is completed to a satisfactory standard.

RFT have an underspend of £27,040 caused mainly by Covid delay to appointing the Coordinator at the beginning of RHE. We will use this on a series of events and publications to share the learning from RHE.

## What next?

The National Lottery Community Fund has been a good funder. It has understood the development of RHE and allowed the partners to redefine priorities after three years of experimental work in a rapidly changing society. Three areas of partnership work will be funded by NLCF following RHE:

1. An underspend from the original funding will be used to fund RFT and partners to share the learning from RHE. Although a relatively small amount of money, it may be the aspect of the project that has greatest long term impact because it is outward looking. After responsive, intelligent and committed delivery work from partners, good reporting processes and reflection time, we are clear about lessons from RHE for small community groups, larger influential practitioners and the sector as a whole.
2. A Cost of Living extension will allow the partnership to continue shared learning and delivery work for an additional 12 months. The partners have made a wide range of plans to directly address poverty in their communities, such as kitchens for asylum seekers, supporting food banks to meet the needs of adults with learning difficulties, dehydration initiatives in new areas. We anticipate that the variety of this activity in a well established partnership will ensure spread of good practice and innovation. RFT will look at two issues arising from the overall partnership; lack of provision in rural areas and improved self advocacy for people in food need.
3. RFT will begin a new NLCF funded partnership project with 7 new partners and 1 RHE partner. The purpose of the new project is to bridge social divides. Identifying the need to do this arose from RHE.

RHE has developed the work of all of the RHE partners, and the projects they undertake next will reflect that.

*"Using our learnings from free meals delivery to recipients through RHE, we have approached the local authority (London Borough of Waltham Forest) to pilot a free meals delivery system to vulnerable residents in their Independent Living Schemes (ILS). We are still in the trial period (which will end in May 2023). We are paying for a cyclist to deliver meals once a week to 4 ILS across the borough. After this pilot, we will have a case to apply for a small pot of funding (hopefully from the LBWF) to pay for the cycle delivery of these meals."* Hornbeam

*"RHE put us in a very good position to be commissioned by the local authority (London Borough of Waltham Forest) to work on long-term food resilience in response to food insecurity locally. As part of this, we are setting up a Food Partnership (learning from our Brighton and Hove partners). This is the legacy of the RHE funding."* Hornbeam

*"Using our learnings from RHE, we are expanding our ready-meals 'take-away' option - where a collectively organised street of residents make a bulk order of take-aways every Friday. They pay £5 a meal and order between 5 - 15 takeaways. Our community cafe team is looking at other similarly organised collectives of residents who could put in a bulk order of ready-meals weekly. This model has proven to work for the cafe team, as they have limited capacity to manage individual orders & deliveries of meals (which has been one of the biggest learnings out of RHE)." Hornbeam*

Hornbeam and BHFP were impressed by NOW's training and both now offer training for adults with learning difficulties.

*"RHE & the pandemic culminated in us bringing forward and massively scaling up our ready-meals exploration. Locally, it has placed us in good stead with the local authority and has helped us leverage a commission from them to look at long term food resilience locally (looking at ways to address food insecurity). In terms of how we work or think - having this long-term funding has allowed us the opportunity to truly pilot ideas and learn from them in a way that short-term funding doesn't allow for. Going forward, we hope to only focus on securing long-term funding."* Hornbeam

*"We now source more locally grown produce supporting a diverse food economy; keeping more money in the local economy as well as supporting jobs in farming and food production. There is less time and distance between the grower and the buyer, often referred to as the field to fork journey."* NOW

NOW will continue to work with RFT on a project where their participants will spend time doing activities at a rural organic farm. This is a long way from NOW's starting point. In fact, the project leader there was somewhat aghast to associate pigs with the sausage rolls they serve when she first went to the farm.

## Key points

- RHE met or exceeded most of its targets. It far exceeded the target number of meals.
- The partnership was important. Partners learnt from each other and the partnership identified some key issues for the whole sector.
- The work was well managed. All of the delivery partners were committed and proficient.
- Covid and the impact of the so-called 'Cost of Living Crisis' were significant.
- We travelled a long way with our attempts to ensure and define good nutrition. Good nutrition in a community setting includes understanding the context of the project and understanding the diners' whole situation.
- RHE partners struggled to generate income as intended and none has transformed their economic model.
- Training was highly valued for the participants, particularly for social and mental health support. Many people went on to paid work, some in the community food sector.
- The research work probably cost more than was justified by the impact it is likely to have.
- We became aware of the importance of surplus food supply chains and identified how these might be improved.
- We began to identify models that might begin to improve access to agroecological food but little of the food used was from agroecological farms.
- On a personal level, all of the delivery partners treated participants with dignity and respect which created a culture where confidence and capacity to take action grew. This is one aspect of 'food sovereignty.'
- The project could not address the root causes of inequality and poverty, which are largely policy issues.
- All of the partners have significantly developed their role or food work as a result of RHE and all have robust plans for the future of this kind of work.
- Well run, compassionate and resourceful community groups are uniquely placed to address need in society and are very good value for money. Where people in need are resourced to devise solutions with and for their neighbours, the results are more likely to be enduring and transformative and the investment in skills, structures and relationships is embedded where it is needed.

