

# Towards Rural Equity with a Focus on Food

## 1. Introduction and summary

This report is the result of an informal piece of research which brought together a group of organisations working to support people in rural areas. The aim was to create a point of connection across these organisations, to explore ways of working towards rural food equity and to identify some useful next steps.

The Real Farming Trust convened this research to find out:

- What the needs of rural food support projects are.
- If there is something useful to be done by an overarching project in the rural space, that isn't already being done.

***“Rurality has a small voice, but rurality keeps the urban going.”***



### 1.1 Summary



- There are common themes, alongside context-specific needs, in the challenges and issues experienced by rural food equity projects, that are different from those in urban areas. They include:

Supplies of affordable food - surplus supply, bulk buying  
Storage and facilities for processing and for training  
Stigma and lack of anonymity  
Getting the word out about affordable food support  
Rural premium (on transport, housing, fuel)  
A (lack of a) rural food policy and campaigning voice  
Providing evidence of need

- Some projects have found successful responses to some of these challenges that can be usefully replicated in other rurally based organisations.
- A forum for rural food equity organisations can offer support and solutions if the framing of forum events is thoughtfully managed, to maximise the best use of time for all involved.

Recommendations arising from this research for practitioners, funders and policy makers are to:

- Enable ongoing opportunities for organisations working towards rural food equity to network and communicate, with static resources and a live forum and learning opportunities. Funders could recommend that budget is built into grants to facilitate participation in relevant networks, and practitioners could allow for this time in project structuring.
- Identify and research regionally localised food equity networks that cross urban and rural boundaries.
- Create an impactful collective voice for rural partners that is about rural equity including but not limited to food.
- Invest in rural communities - they underpin food resilience for all.

***“People need to be able to afford to live, work and raise families in rural areas. We need a narrative around the idea that rural is the solution.”***

What is the Real Farming Trust?

The Real Farming Trust connects and supports people who are transforming our food system from the grassroots up. We provide spaces for new ideas and partnerships to



flourish, fund small-scale community food and farming, and build the evidence base for agroecology by measuring social impact.

### Why research rural food equity?

Facing poverty and hardship in a rural area is particularly challenging. There are fewer services in place to meet the needs of households facing poverty and hardship, than in urban locations.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 Terms used in this report

### Equity/poverty - food justice

Initially it was difficult to arrive at a common language to describe what we were researching. Terminology for the projects and people with whom participants were working included food equity, food poverty, food access and food security. One participant asked if we could “*Call a spade a spade*” and refer to food poverty, and another asked “*What if we stop talking about food poverty and just talk about poverty?*” Working towards food equity was the goal of all projects involved, and this became the term used throughout the research.

However, all participants agreed that it is important to note that, “*You can’t differentiate food insecurity from financial insecurity*”.

### Defining rural

The Rural-Urban classification for England<sup>2</sup> based on census information was used in identifying the participants of the research. For the purposes of the research, participants' definitions of ‘rural’ were also accepted, even when covering small country towns.

Despite large distances and geographical differences between the rural participants taking place (from the Islands of Scotland to Cornwall), the research found some common themes that are specific to the rural context.

### Surplus

Surplus food is food that has been produced and cannot be sold. This could be at a farm eg. fruit or veg grown as a contingency margin to ensure fulfilment of supermarket and other contracts. This could also be within a retail or wholesale food business to ensure a



reasonable contingency for quality control. Another example of surplus could be label or packaging damaged produce that cannot be sold by manufacturers and supermarkets.

*“The extra costs involved in picking, packing and transporting their surplus mean it is often cheaper for farmers and growers to leave unwanted surplus produce unharvested, use it for biofuel or send it to landfill.”<sup>3</sup>*

### 1.3 Who was involved?

The organisations who participated in the research alongside the Real Farming Trust were:

Nourishing Norfolk, Norfolk Community Foundation

Rural Action Derbyshire

Feeding Devon

Feeding Gloucestershire

Gleaning Cornwall, Bosavern CSA, Sustainable Cornwall

The Vale Food Partnership, Wales

Food 4 Fife

Church of England

Plunkett Foundation

CSA Network

FareShare

Scottish Rural Action

Two of the people involved in rural food support projects from different locations were also farmers, and one of the Scottish representatives was a crofter.

Food Matters of Brighton provided facilitation and shaped some of the discussions.

The participant organisations were invited to ensure a mix of regional and national projects, and a good geographical spread; invitees from Northern Ireland were unfortunately not able to attend.

### 1.4 Report structure

Section 2 of the report explains the method of research. Then, in section 3, the report outlines: the main challenges voiced by the participants; discussions that took place during the conversations; and responses and solutions that are already being offered by food equity





projects. Finally, in section 4, the report presents the conclusions and recommendations of the research for practitioners, funders, and policymakers in the food equity sector.



## 2. The research process

The research was initiated by identifying articles, reports and organisations; those known to the Real Farming Trust and others found through online searches of relevant terminology. This was followed by one to one interviews with representatives of organisations and projects supporting those in rural areas who faced hardship. The participants were invited to join a series of four online conversations and each conversation was followed up with a feedback survey. After conversation #3, there was also a survey which asked participants to prioritise a list of ideas for next steps.

### Initial research

Participant organisations were identified through the following networks, and invited by email and telephone to join the research.

- Feeding Britain is a campaigning organisation who works with partners across the UK to develop sustainable and dignified approaches to protect people from hunger. They welcomed the research to be carried out and very helpfully offered introductions to partners in their network who were located rurally.
- The Sustainable Food Places (SFP) network brings together pioneering food partnerships from towns, cities, boroughs, districts and counties across the UK that are driving innovation and best practice on all aspects of healthy and sustainable food. Locating rural food partnerships led to connections with food equity projects in those areas.
- Introductions to national organisations working on poverty initiatives, such as the Plunkett Foundation and the Church of England, came about through Real Farming Trust relationships.

### One to one phone and online interviews

A set of questions (Appendix 1) was used to prompt conversation if needed, but it was more usual that participants gave a summary of the work they were doing towards rural equity and highlighted those parts of it that they felt were relevant to the conversation.

### Conversations

Four conversations of two hours each took place online between October 2023 and February 2024. The conversations were loosely structured but professionally facilitated. They were recorded with notes taken and distributed to participants, so that anyone who missed a session had an opportunity to catch up.

Numbers of participants attending conversations, including Real Farming Trust and facilitator

Month	Oct	Nov	Jan	Feb
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Participant no.	13	9	13	13
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It was observed that, although there are resources available aimed at those working towards food equity, there were none known that focused specifically on rural issues. Participants agreed that the conversations were a useful place to establish and deepen relationships with others working on the same issues in a rural location, but that it was stressful to prioritise them over competing needs.

*“This sort of networking is really useful but really difficult because resources are growing smaller”*

*“Working in a large rural area I wanted to reach out for more rural models”*

#### Feedback surveys

The feedback surveys were completed by very few participants. This indicated the stretched capacity that all regional projects reported. However, they did offer the opportunity for some honest contributions that may have been more difficult to put forward in a conversation.

*“Not enough specific discussion about ideas for partnership.”*



### 3. Findings

The numbered challenges listed below are specific to rural situations, and emerged both in one to one and group discussions. Other issues were discussed, and are outlined below, but are not necessarily specific to a rural location.

#### 3.1 Rural challenges

This research found that the main challenges presented by the participants that were specific to rural locations were:

1. Understanding where, when and how best to reach people in widely spread rural areas with support and food
2. Enabling bulk buying and storage of food supplies in rural areas.
3. Enabling rural food support organisations to batch process and preserve fresh food, and their clients to be able to use it.
4. Enabling non-stigmatising food support in rural areas where anonymity is difficult.
5. Making sure people know that lower cost food options exist, when they are living in a widely spread rural area.
6. Overcoming transport barriers in rural areas.  
*"If you live in a town, you can walk to a local supermarket, and it means that you are significantly saving money."*  
*"...because public services have been cut, for access to a town for shopping - a vehicle is required."*
7. Addressing the additional barrier of fuel poverty in rural areas.  
*"Mains gas is a rarity, so minimum orders for fuel compounds food poverty quite greatly - reliance on bottled gas or oil plunges families into significant food poverty."*  
*"The two go hand in hand - food and energy"*
8. Building the rural premium into all financial assistance.
9. Making rural poverty more visible with sufficiently granular data



*“Regional collective data (such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation) hide pockets of severe poverty because the population is spread over a wider area. Privilege and poverty sit side by side in many rural locations - where urban people take holidays or own second homes.”*

10. Building the rural food voice.

- How to influence policy about rural food provision?*
- Some people/organisations are already working on policy influence within their regions.*
- Can this partnership provide a collective voice that is stronger than individual organisations?*
- What makes the rural statement different to the urban statement?*

## 3.2 Rural challenges that also exist in urban areas

### The wider context

Most if not all participants referred to the issues that their organisations were working on as being rooted in the wider political, social and environmental context.

*“Capitalism never fails to grind me down - the hold on the world of corporate and geopolitical interests.”*

Frustration was expressed about decision makers who do not understand the limitations of the current food environment ie. that it is controlled by certain companies and does not pay farmers enough for production.

*“(We are) trying to engage Local Government to show leadership - that’s what we lack.”*

Other participants were disappointed with cuts to their local council budget, meaning that *“anything that is extra to the basics of services isn’t possible.”*

*“Tools for changes have been given and then taken away, so we are looking at other avenues for funding...but it should be covered by the government.”*

However, discussions also covered the idea that, *“Going local seems a good way to bypass multinational power. Local agency is huge.”*



### Shrinking supplies - lack of access

Whilst everyone agreed that using surplus food to address poverty is a sticking plaster approach, one issue for many projects was that of accessing adequate quantities of nutritious food using limited funds. Most relied on surplus, and many worked with FareShare, whilst acknowledging that some of the solutions (requiring surplus food) were prolonging the problems (of a wasteful food system by design). There were reports from some projects of no longer being able to access the same quantities of food as previously, from FareShare or elsewhere. Some rural locations reported that FareShare was no longer able, or had never delivered in their area.

Early in the research, the participant from FareShare reported a contraction in the donated food they were receiving, and therefore able to distribute. One of the main reasons given was that subsidies aimed at incentivising green energy production via anaerobic digestion had negatively impacted willingness of businesses to donate food for reuse.<sup>4</sup>

However, in Feb 2024 the UK government announced funding to incentivise farmers to direct surplus to organisations like FareShare who can use the food rather than send it to energy production.<sup>5</sup>

Whether the outcome of this fund will be beneficial to the projects who were finding it difficult to access supplies, remains to be seen in practice. In principle, FareShare welcomes the fund - that they have been campaigning for over a number of years. Meanwhile, participants in the conversations agreed that,

*“Charities who pick up supermarket waste shouldn’t have to find funding for this, supermarkets should pay them to do it.”*

### Size matters

Some pantries in rural areas have found that food redistributors will only supply catering pack sized quantities of food, and FareShare agreed that there is a need to make larger size packs of food accessed directly from manufacturers, useful to food support projects. This is not unique to rural areas, urban projects are struggling with the same issue, but may be able to solve it more easily due to the higher local density of other projects to work together with on sharing food.

It was suggested that FareShare and other surplus distributors at the top of the redistribution chain could undertake more processing where necessary. This is more efficient than numerous smaller community groups making ready meals, dehydrating and repacking.

*“The big guys are best at that, they understand the needs further down and can deal with H&S and can process more efficiently.”*





## Who grows where?

Some projects were keen to learn how to make useful contact with local farmers and build local connections with food producers, to reduce their reliance on larger food redistribution charities. The conversations that were part of this research offered an opportunity to learn from others who had been successful in linking up with local farmers.

One of the outcomes of this research was a public-facing webinar about Gleaning, that took place on March 7th 2024, where the questions to be answered were framed by one of the participants in the research (Nourishing Norfolk), and expertise and experience was shared by another (Gleaning Cornwall).<sup>6</sup> 49 people attended this webinar, from a broad spectrum of food equity organisations, indicating a need for this kind of information beyond the participants of the rural equity conversations.



<https://gleaningcornwall.org.uk/>

There was agreement that it would be useful for food support projects to know what is grown close to their locations. Some projects were aware that the main crops grown in their region were wheat and other cereals - not very useful for food support - whereas some projects were based in strongly horticultural areas and were able to access fresh fruit and vegetables more easily. The Defra Land Use and Crop Maps in England<sup>7</sup> give an overview of land area





used for different agricultural purposes, but a more granular mapping of who grows what, where, is difficult to find, if it indeed exists.

Some participants believed that releasing land to grow food for local markets, or in order to grow specifically for Food Equity projects was important in addressing food equity.

*"We should be looking to create a patchwork of growing spaces ... community growing spaces and market gardens and small farms, to produce veg and fruit, especially for food banks. Get recipients involved, learning about not just food production and the plight of farmers but also linking to kitchens and learning to cook the produce."*

### Cheap food is not the solution

It was recognised that solutions to food poverty often rely on the symptoms of a broken food system - such as food waste - or on creating disadvantage for other people in the system, such as farmers.

Paying farmers enough was seen as part of the solution to rural equity. All participants wanted to see a fairer food system for the people who are growing, producing and distributing the food, not just for the purchasers.

*"Farmers are trapped with their backs against the wall. They've been told to make food as cheap as possible. Supermarkets are importing from all over the world. So much arable farming is going to distilling, so that we can export whisky - that's the trap that the farmers are in. Why can't farmers be paid to produce good food for the people of the country?"*

All participants understood that paying less for food would exacerbate the problems facing rural food equity. The Food and Farming Countryside Commission film, *Gods Lone Country*, was seen as a useful illustration of this.<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, participants had experienced that even at a strategic level, council representatives are not recognising that cheaper food perpetuates the problems of the food system.

*"I despaired when the idea was put forward (by the local council representative) that to solve food poverty we need cheaper food."*

### How to build nutritional density into meals, affordably and sustainably?

The importance of supplying nutritionally dense meals, rather than just calories, was underlined by Hiding in Plain Sight<sup>9</sup>, a report on malnutrition rates in the UK, that was also reported in the Guardian<sup>10</sup>, published in December 2023. This report reminded participants of the daunting complexity of providing affordable food support.



After finding that their region was one of the worst for malnutrition rates, one participant reflected, *"When you are trying to unpick something you continue to find obstacles, making it a more complex puzzle than you originally thought. We need to keep moving at the pace of our understanding."*

One participant wondered, *"How to unlock lots of consistent fresh and seasonal food without throwing a lot of diesel at the problem?"*

The Ready, Healthy, Eat project run by the Real Farming Trust aimed to investigate ways of increasing nutritional density and affordability in ready meals distributed by food equity projects. Resulting resources are available online.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.3 Responses to some of the rural challenges

During the series of conversations, some food equity projects were able to offer examples of some of the ways in which they had met challenges that were commonly faced, and ideas for next steps were generated within the conversations.

1. Where, when and how best to reach people in widely spread rural areas with support and food?

*Mobile pantries/food vans, pop-up pantries/food banks/meals (Feeding Devon, Food 4 Fife).*

*Using existing infrastructure such as churches and village halls (Church of England, Feeding Devon).*

*Nourishing Norfolk supports a Coastal Community Supermarket that offers affordable food and other essentials across locations in North and West Norfolk. The Coastal Community Supermarket is a low-cost food club where people pay a one-off membership to join and then they have access to food that is up to 30% less than mainstream supermarkets.*



<https://www.coastalhealthwellbeing.org.uk/communitysupermarket>

2. Enabling bulk buying, and storage of food supplies in rural areas.  
*Community networks partnering private companies for warehousing and distribution vehicles*<sup>17</sup>
  
3. Enabling rural food support organisations to batch process and preserve fresh food, and their clients to be able to use it.  
*Pop up and mobile kitchens.*  
*“Slow cookers were bought for people - at a social club for elderly people, slow cookers were given out and people were taught how to use them.”*  
*“A local college with chefs are creating frozen ready meals to be distributed in rural areas.”*
  
4. Enabling non-stigmatising food support in rural areas where anonymity is difficult.  
*Cash first campaigning: Adequate benefit payments and fair wages that match the cost of living are seen by multiple agencies as the most dignified approach to addressing the root causes of poverty.*<sup>12</sup> *Despite this recognition, organisations wondered about how to retain the community cohesion and social capital created by frontline food projects, whilst moving towards the longer term strategic approach of cash-first.*  
*Feeding Britain and other organisations are working on increasing Healthy Start voucher uptake.*<sup>13,14</sup>  
*‘Help yourself freezer’ and community fridges can offer some anonymity*<sup>15,16</sup>
  
5. Making sure people know that lower cost food options exist, when they are living in a widely spread rural area.
  
6. Overcoming transport barriers in rural areas.



*Community transport/dial-a-lift services are sometimes in place, but can be underused.<sup>1</sup>*

7. Addressing the additional barrier of fuel poverty in rural areas.  
*Rural fuel buying groups can sometimes assist.<sup>18</sup>*  
*Wraparound support in addition to food provision.*  
*“Energy advisors come to hubs to help households access any grants they are entitled to. If you didn’t have gas, you could claim money to your bank account, but many households didn’t know.”*  
*Fuel banks can operate alongside food banks where solid fuel is an option.*
8. Building the rural premium into all financial assistance.
9. Making rural poverty more visible with sufficiently granular data
10. Building the rural food voice.  
*Continuing with a rural food equity partnership - inviting campaigners who are already working on food equity to add the rural voice.*

### 3.4. Initiatives by participants that have worked well

Participants shared successes that may be useful as themes for future webinars or case studies.

- The Feeding Devon network are piloting a series of pop-up pantries in rural village church halls
- Gleaning Cornwall enables a large network of volunteers, with five paid coordinators to harvest and/or collect large quantities of fruit and vegetables and deliver them to food support projects across Cornwall and part of Devon.<sup>6</sup>
- Nourishing Norfolk has developed a successful private partnership where local business offers gratis warehouse storage and distribution of ambient produce.<sup>17</sup> They also run affordable mobile food shops visiting rural villages<sup>19</sup>.





<https://norsegroup.co.uk/news/norse-help-to-nourish-norfolk/>

- The Church of England has leveraged beneficial funding relationships and infrastructure opportunities offered by church buildings across both urban and rural areas to run the Warm Welcome project.<sup>20</sup>
- In the Outer Hebrides, Local Food Markets are being created in order to engage directly with local producers to support Island food security.

*Tagsa Uibhist are a community-based charity whose aim is to promote health and wellbeing in Uist. They are working to challenge local food poverty and insecurity through a range of diverse initiatives, including developing a sustainable and vibrant local food economy and engaging in extensive policy advocacy.*



<https://www.tagsa.co.uk/>



- Food 4 Fife have run a successful project setting up pop-up kitchens with full facilities for processing. This has led to the development of strong communities continuing with mutual support beyond the end of the project.

### 3.5 The capacity of organisations to contribute to research

The participants gave their time generously towards this research, with minimal outcome incentives - the opportunity to build new relationships with others working on the same issues, this report. Even two hours per month had an impact on the capacity of the organisations involved, who, due to limited and often scarce resources, had to juggle priorities to allocate the best use of their time. Networking is always an add-on to project delivery and is, rightly, unlikely to be prioritised above it. One participant pointed out that,

*“We can all agree on collaboration and partnership being a good thing, but being part of a partnership entails committing working hours to it. Can we afford to contribute unpaid time to a partnership?”*

Despite their limited capacity to engage in a network, projects were keen to learn from each other and some had a desire to continue the learning and relationships through an ongoing partnership or network of organisations working towards rural food equity.



## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

This research has been a result of the Real Farming Trust's desire to understand more about what is happening in rural areas to support food equity. Twelve organisations, together with the Real Farming Trust and Food Matters, came together via a series of online conversations and formed new relationships, learning about each others' approaches to rural food equity. Some conclusions were as follows.

There are common themes, alongside context-specific needs, in the challenges and issues experienced by rural food equity projects, that are different from those in urban areas.

Some projects have found successful responses to some of these challenges that are useful to other rurally based organisations.

A forum for rural food equity organisations can offer support and solutions if the framing and timing of communications is thoughtfully managed, to maximise the best use of time for all involved.

Who and what was missing from the research?

The geographical spread across the organisations involved was large, but was missing some perspectives.

As mentioned above, the invitees from Northern Ireland were unable to attend. There were only two participants from Scotland and one from Wales, with nine from England. It would have been more balanced to have more representation from the non-English nations.

The Plunkett Foundation and Scottish Rural Action were the only national organisations involved who specialise in rurality. Other national campaigning rural organisations could have been invited to join and could have offered a useful perspective, such as Action with Communities in Rural England, and Campaign to Protect Rural England.

Although the research did not carry out any diversity monitoring of the participants in the group, visually all were white-presenting and mostly women. The research would have been enhanced by a wider demographic bringing additional perspectives.

Early in the research process there was a decision taken not to invite people with living experience of using food support into the research process. This was because of the nature of the research, ie. to find out what work was going on towards rural equity in rural locations. It was also felt that there were no directly useful personal outcomes from this research process, for people with living experience of using food support, only for the organisations of whom they were the clients.

We did not attempt a literature review for this report, as this was a specific attempt to hear directly from practitioners in the field of rural equity. There is much to inform rural policy and





practice already in the public domain - some useful reports are included in the references section below.

### Future research opportunities

More in-depth case studies were requested by the group of participants, so that they could *"See what others are doing and be able to ask: How do you build that? How does it work strategically? With funding? What is feasible? What might be tried for?"*

Rural areas are often perceived through the lens of the 'rural idyll', with pockets of deprivation getting lost when existing measures are used, such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation. It is important for practitioners, funders and policy makers to understand the reality lying beneath this perception. Evidencing rural poverty is needed, both at scale, and locally at a granular level.

Detailed and live mapping of what is grown where in the UK, with a particular focus on fruit and vegetables, would be useful to organisations who could utilise surplus.

Urban food equity organisations were not invited to be part of these conversations, though some participants worked across both urban and rural areas. It would be useful to explore the synergies between geographically proximate urban and rural food equity organisations.

Further research drawing on the living experience of people in rural areas in addition to the projects addressing their needs would add a crucial voice.



## 4.1 Recommendations

This report recommends the following actions that recognise specific needs for work towards food equity, arising from the characteristics of rural locations and communities, and the ways in which rural locations and livelihoods are perceived.

- Enable ongoing opportunities for organisations working towards rural food equity to network and communicate, with static resources and a live forum, research and learning opportunities. Funders could recommend that budget is built into grants to facilitate participation in relevant networks, and practitioners could allow for this time in project structuring.
- Broaden the geographic range of the organisations involved in a rural network and involve organisations working locally, regionally and nationally.
- Research the usefulness of regionally localised networks, linking urban projects with rural satellite projects working towards food equity.
- Create an impactful collective voice for rural partners that is about rural equity including but not limited to food.
- Invest in rural communities - they underpin food resilience for all.

***“Without rural communities there would be no agriculture. Because rural life supports agriculture, rural communities enable folk to live in rural locations. Village schools, shops, health centres - and good food - enable the rural life that farmers need.”***

*Theona Morrison, Scottish Rural Action*



<https://gleaningcornwall.org.uk/>

## References and citations

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<https://www.foodcoalition.scot/>

## Appendix 1

Questions used as prompts in initial conversations with organisations working on poverty in rural areas

- Who and what organisations are involved in providing access to food for people in need in your rural area?
- Is there other provision that goes hand in hand with food eg. transport subsidy (to reach food bank) or delivery?
- Wraparound services, eg. advice, health, education, housing, social activity - provided by the same organisation or a different one?
- Where does the food provided come from?
- Are there any recipients of your project involved with delivery of the project?
- How do potential clients find out about the food provision in your area?
- How do potential clients get the food? Do they have to come to a hub, or is there a delivery service (pros and cons)?
- Who are the key people in your area who keep it all going?
- Would it be useful to link with your nearest urban food poverty project?
- Would it be useful to link with other rural food poverty projects?
- What kind of places are usually used for collection points rurally?
- What kind of places are used for pop-up food hubs or other distribution points rurally?
- Would it be useful to share experiences with other organisations doing similar work? Is this something you do already?
- Who else should I be talking to?